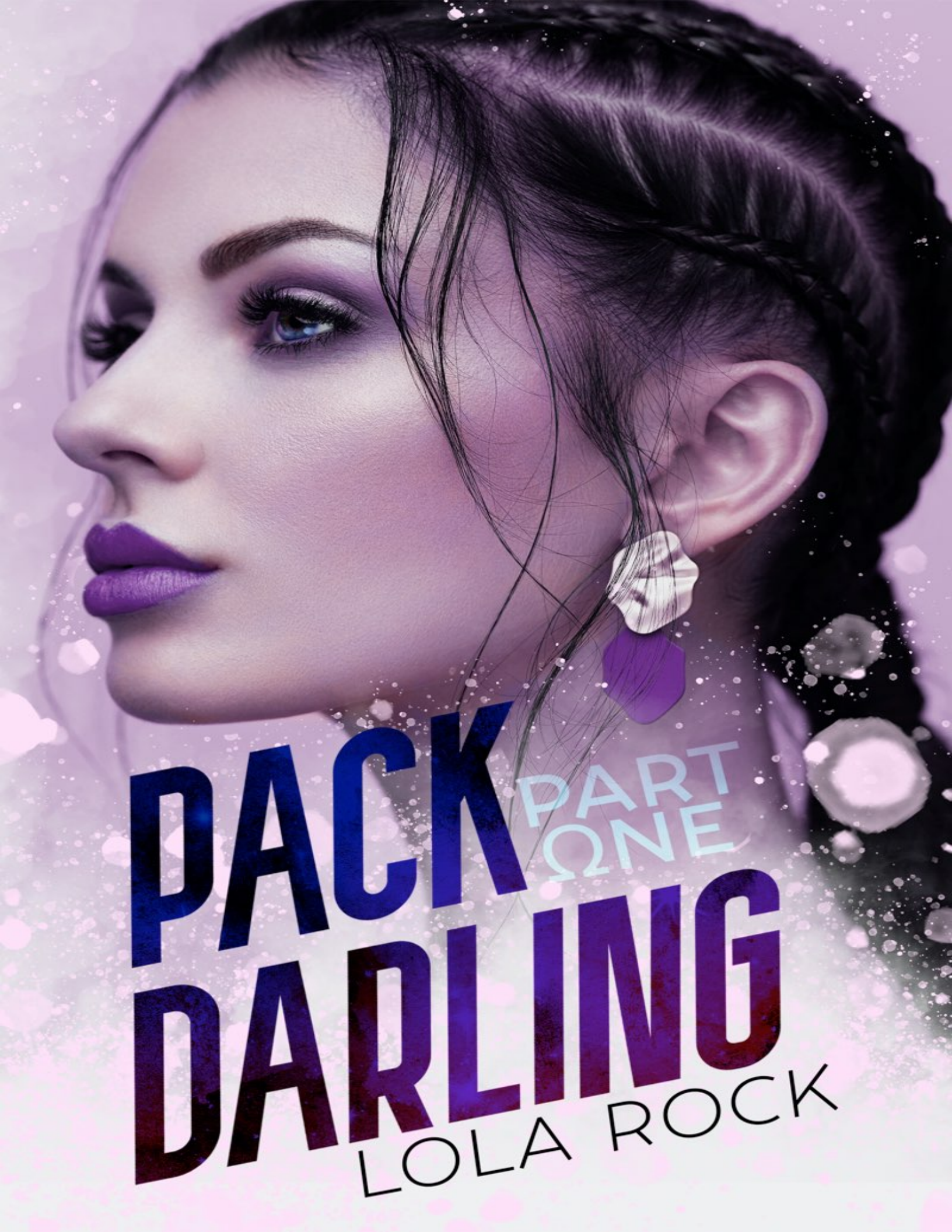
PACK DARLING
PART ONE
LOLA ROCK

PACK DARLING

PART ΩNE

LOLA ROCK

OceanofPDF.com

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CONTENT WARNING

This story contains references to past physical and sexual assault. Lilah has a traumatic past, and the emotions are intense. Please take care of yourself and avoid if this content will be disturbing.

If you object to cursing, knotting, or MM action, this is not the series for you.

Happy reading wherever you land!

<3 Lola

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ONE

LILAH

WITH FIVE DEADBOLTS and a chain locking my door, it should be clear that I'm avoiding all things omega. Bra off, spicy Cheetos, and a TBR pile like whoa, I'm set for the perfect Friday night.

But Trainer Marc keeps knocking like I haven't spent the past minute plugging my ears. "Lilah Darling! You will not blow off another dance team practice."

"I'm not on the dance team!" I call through the thin wood, wishing I could reinforce it with steel bars.

"Yes, you are," Marc growls, trying to channel some alpha, but he's just as beta as every other power-tripping ass of a trainer at the Omega Cultivation Center I'm so unlucky to call home.

"Not since I was like seven years old, *Marc*."

"Lilah," his growl deepens in a threat I've heard a hundred times.

A threat I *know* he'll deliver on.

My heart picks up, reminding me that it's a terrible idea to talk back to trainers, but at least when Marc punishes me, he'll follow OCC rules.

No blood or disfigurement.

Maybe he'll cane my ass, send me to solitary, or reduce my rations again, but even if he serves up a beating, it'll be a *joy* compared to what Rachel and the others'll do if I show up for that practice.

They won’t follow the rules.

Anything’s fair game when we’re competing for the same alphas.

I keep telling them I don’t want to compete.

I’m happy alone, locked in my dorm with books, blankets, and a stolen streaming subscription. I’m not after their packs or their futures because I’m just another sad ward of the OCC, and no decent pack is ever going to make me an offer. No decent pack will ever have the kind of cash it’s going to take to repay my almost twenty years of room, board, and training fees.

Plus the massive wad that the Center paid to buy me from my mom.

What kind of packs does Rachel think we’re competing for?

When I used to go to socials, the only alphas who ever gave me a glance were from the shadiest, nastiest packs—the kind who saw a little omega girl with no parents and no real guardian as the perfect opportunity to go buck wild with zero consequences.

I would love to *not* compete.

To hide in my room forever and let all the other omegas steal the spotlight and affection they so desperately desire.

But Marc keeps knocking and knocking. “Rachel rolled her ankle. Evgenia needs a soloist for tomorrow’s showcase.”

Soloist? I jump, tipping over the precious Cheetos that I only snagged because someone punched the wrong button on the vending machine.

“You have ten minutes.” Marc rattles the doorknob. “Be dressed and in the studio, or I’ll have your locks drilled and your Wi-Fi access revoked.”

I’m willing to go without food.

I’m even willing to go without locks thanks to the toothbrush shiv under my pillow.

What I’m not willing to go without?

Fucking Wi-Fi.

Is he a *demon*?

I tug my hair, but there’s no time to waste. I have to run, even knowing the hell I’ll catch for showing my face at the studio.

Putting my bra back on feels like the worst kind of surrender.

I whip on baggy pants and an oversized shirt, barely able to move around the tiny cupboard of a room that only has space for my bed and the built-in desk/closet/shelf unit.

I can’t remember living anywhere else, although I try on a daily basis. All I have left of the before-time is the memory of a hard-eyed woman who looks like the face I see in the cracked mirror.

My mom had rosebud lips like mine, but hers were always pressed together in annoyance. We have the same tiny build, the same light brown hair, and the same grey eyes.

So much the same, and yet she still sold me off the second my blood tests came back omega.

I tie my hair into a messy pony and rush to the studio. I have to sprint to make it to the dance building before Marc delivers on his stupid threat. I cut across the perfectly green lawn, sprinting past spas, salons, gyms, and teaching buildings.

Everything a budding omega needs.

But nothing this omega wants.

Panting, I bust into the dance team’s practice room just before my ten minutes are up.

“Ah. Miss Lilah. So nice of you to join.” Trainer Evgenia, smug ballerina bitch she is, offers me an emaciated smile.

Nodding, I slink to the back of the room, wanting to go unseen.

No way is that happening.

Sitting at the front with her ankle propped on a silk pillow, Rachel glares like she already has my blood under her fingernails. Resentment sharpens her scent until it’s wedged in my sinuses like a serrated blade.

Beckah, Jovie, and the rest of Rachel's clique whisper in their huddle, not even pretending to stretch while they're so busy party-planning my funeral.

"Not back there. Come to the front where you belong." Trainer Evgenia grabs my elbow while I'm distracted. She pulls me dead center in the front row, giving me the perfect view of the mirror and the dance team's firing squad glares.

My shoulders hunch. *This is so not ending well.*

Evgenia does a little clap. "Now, my doves. Let's run through the routine for our star. She'll only need to watch it once."

The room's resentment level ratchets up until I'm choking on sour barbs of omega rage.

I want to strangle past Lilah, who thought showing off was the answer to our problems. If I proved I was the best, I'd be snapped up by the good alphas and escape the OCC to be pampered as some pack's princess.

I saw it happen to other girls. Why not me?

I was eight when I learned that answer hard.

Darlings are literal OCC property. The rules that keep the other omegas safe do not apply to us because instead of us paying to be here, the OCC pays for *us* to attend.

Other omegas have backers. Supporters. Families. They have eyes looking out for them, ready to speak up when alphas cross lines that shouldn't be crossed. They have resources, money, and extra tutors. They form friendships and alliances, little omega cliques that never include me.

All I've ever had is hard work.

Even when I was young, Evgenia wasn't one to take bribes. I busted my ass and fairly won the lead in the junior dance showcase.

I busted my ass *all over* the OCC, taking top rank in class after class, earning the trainers' recognition in academics, etiquette, combat…

Noelle was the first omega to remind me of my place.

Just before the showcase, she and five other faceless mean girls from the teen section cornered me, kicked the shit out of me, and left me tied up in a closet.

A janitor found me three days later.

Since then, I've never come first in anything. I never show off, always blending at the back, never ever outshining the current queen bee and her court.

They come and go.

After Noelle was placed with her pack, there was Juniper who shaved my head, Mya who threatened to have me sold to her drug lord Daddy's enforcers, and Penny who ripped out my earring and split my lip.

Eve. Samantha. Madison.

Rachel is the flavor of the week, stewing with a tension that promises she's going to follow in the footsteps of all the bitchy omegas who came before her.

I zone out as the team runs through their hip-hop routine, deliberately not paying attention because fuck me sideways, I *will* remember the steps after I see them once.

My brain's a sponge for dance.

The team's talented and totally in sync. They throw themselves into the fast-paced routine, moving with such desperation it looks like passion if you don't know what you're seeing.

They know the game.

You've gotta work to catch a pack of alphas worth mating.

If you graduate, heat coming on with no forever offers coming in?

Welcome to life in rotation.

You're pimped out to the highest-bidding pack for sex and surrogacy, popping out pups until you could field your own football team and half the marching band. You never mate. Instead, it's a new pack every heat until

you’re finally dried up, sexed out, and begging for menopause to take you into retirement.

As far as I’m concerned, mating is just as shitty.

I’ve spent my entire life at the mercy of people who take pleasure in hurting me, and I’m supposed to *want* to be bite-bound to a pack of neanderthals who see me as an easy target?

No fucking thank you.

When the girls finish their routine, breathing hard but looking flawless, perfect smiles and perfect makeup, I shove down every instinct that has me bouncing, replaying the choreo in my mind and adding my own twist, wanting to join and move and feel the music, ignoring all this omega bullshit.

But life is better since I learned the truth.

There’s a third option, and I’m not ditching my winning strategy for one catchy song.

So when Evgenia motions me to join, I do what I always do.

I deliberately fuck it up.

The problem is, Evgenia’s been at OCC forever. She’s not like the other trainers, in and out, here maybe a year. They play a girl to earn her loyalty, then weasel their way into a spot as a pack beta, and a ticket to the sweet life.

It leaves me safe, flying so low under the radar I’m practically an earthworm. But Trainer Evgenia has known me since I was an abandoned preschooler bumbling my first arabesque.

As I clumsily recreate the routine, pretending to forget steps, turning the wrong way, and moving so the other girls fall out of their positions, Evgenia watches with a lifted chin and an arched, manicured eyebrow that distinctly says *you think you’re getting away with this shit?*

It’s painful to hold myself back, but every time the girls sniff or scoff at me instead of flashing their fangs in jealousy, I chalk up a win. Let them

think I’m an idiot who can’t remember the choreo. Let them think Evgenia’s just pitying me.

I’ll never show them the truth.

Jealous bitches give you stitches.

After half an hour of awkwardness, Evgenia finally caves. “Enough. Enough. Girls, you’re dismissed. Not *you*,” she hisses when I try to sneak out with the crowd.

Rachel crutches to the door on a swollen ankle, already sizing up how she’s going to cube me into little Lilah pieces.

A few years ago, I would’ve been terrified, knowing what’s coming.

I’ve taken enough beatings that I know how to handle myself, and if Rachel wants to hurt me, she’ll at least hurt back.

But I’m exhausted.

So tired of fighting this fight with every single omega. Dabbing foundation over my bruises, waking up aching with an empty stomach, wondering if I’ll have to fight just to get breakfast. Wondering how the trainers will punish me for fighting. The same cycle every day, over and over and over again.

The clawing. The backstabbing. The hate.

All I want is to be left alone until the OCC realizes I’m never going to awaken, and they’re going to have to let me earn back my debt by working the old-fashioned way instead of shipping me off to be some mafia pack’s sex doll.

Evgenia folds her arms. “You want to explain that performance?”

“Nope.” I rock back on my heels, glancing wistfully at the door.

“Are you taking suppressants?”

“What?” I jerk forward, almost falling over.

“You’re twenty-three and not even in pre-awakening. Most omegas have a pack and a brood of babes by your age. Knowing your…tricks…I’m

not the only trainer who suspects you're sneaking drugs. If you're caught __"

"I'm not taking anything," I say quickly.

"Are you not?" She tilts her head to the side in an elegant, bird-like motion.

Oh, I'm for sure sabotaging my body, but management will never figure out how. I'm just fucked either way if they think I'm on drugs. "I swear."

"Not everyone at the Center is blind to your shine, my little Darling. You'll end up with a pack eventually. Make sure it's one you can live with."

I shudder.

There's *no* pack I can live with, and I strive to keep my shine on matte. I know Evgenia thinks she's doing me a favor by throwing me under the spotlight, but she's actually throwing me under the city bus. "You should let Jovie take the solo. Her turns are super sharp."

So are her fingernails. Long acrylics she keeps bedazzled and filed into claw tips. Now there's a girl who wants some attention. My nails are bitten-down stumps.

"The solo is non-negotiable. You were requested, Lilah."

"By who?" My stump nails cut into my palms, and I'm already planning how to get out of this bullshit.

"That's not important." She waves me off, moving to the sound system. "I want to see the routine from the top. Cleanse my soul after forcing me through that horror show."

With a sigh, I take my spot.

Later, I'll figure out how to earthworm my way out of the dance. It's been a while since I gave myself food poisoning.

So many options for self-sabotage. Anything to keep my ass safe and off that stage.

Since I can't go back in time and erase my childhood, Evgenia already knows my truth.

Just this once, in the semi-safety of the dance studio, I let loose. For two-and-a-half blissful minutes, I feel free, spinning, whirling, twirling, and pretending I'm some other girl.

"Flawless." Evgenia claps. "You're wasting your talent."

My chest heaves, but I could dance for hours. I *would* dance for hours every day if not for the threat of being seen, measured, and sold.

Never again.

Evgenia walks me through a few of the advanced moves, and I'm ready for a second run from the top when I catch the twisted face peeking through the narrow strip of window in the door.

Rachel.

If the past has taught me one thing, it's that retribution will be swift and catty.

And stupid me. I forgot to pack my shiv.

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TWO

LILAH

SINCE I'M ALREADY SCREWED, I stay and dance until the end of the day when Evgenia kicks me out so she can go home and watch her K-dramas.

The campus is quiet.

Everyone's at dinner, sharing fake smiles, playing fake friends, and gossiping over the hottest alphas and the dreamiest packs.

If I walk in now, Rachel and her minions will have the perfect chance to lock onto me. Instead of gift-wrapping myself for the bitch squad, I head to the pool building where the bite of chlorine burns my throat like chicken soup for my battered omega soul. I've spent enough nights in the water to memorize the schedule, and no one will be here until tomorrow morning's swim classes.

I change into my suit and plunge into the heated water, setting a grueling freestyle pace. When my heart's pumping, I dive deep underwater, folding my knees in lotus position at the bottom of the pool.

The water's heavy, pressure pushing at my eardrums like the threat of my future, but it's comfortable down here, hidden away with only my beating heart to keep me company. Sometimes, I think I have espresso for blood, the way I'm constantly jittering, always on high alert, ducking threat after threat.

The water is my cocoon. It’s the only place I feel safe.

When the world quiets to nothing, I start counting heartbeats.

I’m past 150 when my vision starts to go spotty. My throat burns and the familiar *we-need-oxygen-idiot* panic punches me in the lungs.

But I keep holding.

Holding.

Holding.

Everything black.

Now.

Desperate, I kick to the surface just in time to take a gasping, spluttering breath.

I suck in cold air, treading water as my vision slowly comes back. When I can more or less breathe, I start grinding out another round of laps. Then I dip below the surface again.

And again and again.

I repeat the same batshit circuit until I’m barely kicking up in time, my body so used-up, so exhausted, I have to hang against the wall for a few minutes before I can haul myself out of the water.

I lay gasping on the side of the pool like a fresh-gutted fish.

The burn is *glorious*.

I was thirteen when I figured out this trick.

My pre-awakening came early. Even then, I kicked my own ass to relieve stress. When I caught the first baby whiff of my omega perfume, I panicked, just ran and kept running, knowing that as soon as I started to mature, I’d be on the auction block.

A toy for alphas who’ll never see me as a real girl.

I ran so hard, so long, and so fast that the pheromones went away.

When my perfume came back, a track workout sent that shit packing.

The next day, I danced for eight hours and my hormones heard the message. *We’re not doing this awakening thing.*

That’s the whole secret, my whole plan.

All I have to do is keep grinding, exhausting my body so hard it can’t be bothered to pump out the sex hormones that’ll force me to awaken. No packs will notice or want me because I’m defective, and at some point, the OCC will have to write me off as a loss.

Management can’t even put me in rotation because it doesn’t matter if I’m twenty-three or sixty-three. If I’m not awakened, I can’t mate or get pregnant.

I have to be so exhausted I can barely function if I’m ever going to have a future.

That leaves me to deal with the present, and the omegas I can *feel* bitching me out from all the way across campus.

I avoid going back to the dorms for as long as possible, but at some point, I want to sleep on a bed instead of a diving board.

It’s past midnight when I finally cave. Late enough that all the omegas should be tucked in their cozy little beds.

Knowing it won’t go down like that, I detour through the equipment room and pick the lock on the softball club’s cage. Casually armed with an aluminum bat, I sneak through the shadows to my floor.

No one’s around until I hit the common room that’s lit up for a welcoming party. Rachel and five of her minions jump from the couches to surround me.

They’re younger—the oldest maybe nineteen—but they all tower over me.

Height doesn’t scare me.

I have leverage and a killer hitting arm.

What bothers me is the intensity of their scents.

Rachel’s putting off the strongest stench. Her barely there, pre-awakening perfume smells like expired rose water on a good day. Now it hits like thorns and rotted roses. I wrinkle my nose at the bitterness.

“You’re not dancing that solo,” Rachel says through gritted teeth.

“Neither are you.” I point at her air-casted ankle with my bat.

She growls.

It’s a kitten’s growl, high and shrill. I should laugh and blow her off, *but no*.

Fucking omega instincts.

My spine snaps like she just slapped me and goose bumps wiggle all the way down to my tailbone. I can feel my lip curling, an answering growl rumbling in my chest.

The other omegas rumble, and the sound sets me off again.

I’m surrounded.

Surrounded and exhausted, because as much as I *will* protect myself, I don’t want to do this.

It’s all so fucking pointless.

Rachel clenches her fists. “You won’t take them from me.”

Huh? “Take who?”

“Cut the bullshit!” one of the mean girls shouts.

“What’s this about?” I shoot her a glare so acid she backs up a step.

“The Wyvern pack. Who do you think the showcase is for?”

Suddenly Rachel’s hysteria makes at least a little bit of sense.

Wyvern House owns the OCC, among a kajillion other businesses, but their bread-and-butter is black ops merc work. I don’t live so far underneath my self-imposed rock that I don’t know about the Wyvern heirs.

Okay. I don’t know their *names*, just that they exist. The sons of the four founders of Wyvern House. If a pack of dominant, aggressively hot rich boys is shopping omegas, it’s no wonder Rachel wants to wear me as a skinsuit.

Also, *fuck*.

This showcase is a total scam.

I consider handing over my bat and letting these girls beat the shit out of me, but they're going to do that anyway. I might as well get in a few hits.

Stress relief.

And bonus! No solo if they shatter my legs.

"We could just not do this, you know." I tighten my grip on the bat. "I don't want your packs."

"You're playing the long con. I respect it. But do you think we're fucking stupid? Every omega wants Wyvern Pack." Rachel shakes her head, tossing her perfect glossy curls. "Noelle warned me about you."

To be fair, I try not to look Rachel in the face. That's why I never noticed the familiar snub nose and the dark brown eyes that match the ones in my nightmares.

I thought it was weird how all mean girls look the same. Apparently it's not a look they stole from a magazine. It's genetics.

"You're sisters." I swallow hard, lifting my bat. All this time, I thought I was hiding, and Rachel *knew* I was a threat.

"No shit." Rachel's lips curl in a feral grin. "Fuck her up, ladies."

I swing, pushing back the minions who think I didn't see them closing in on me.

Amateurs.

It's five-on-one, but the bat gives me reach. I hit Jovie first, knocking her off her feet so she can't come at me with her tetanus nails.

I jab one in the stomach, kick another, but they circle closer and closer, and I spent way too many hours dancing and grinding laps. My arms are too weak. I'm too exhausted.

Knowing how this ends, I make one last lunge and slip through their claws just long enough to jab my bat into Rachel's ribs.

She topples with a sweet *oof*.

Then Jovie snatches my wrist, Beckah steals my bat, and the girls dart in with sharp nails and sharper snarls. Their touches make my skin crawl

like vipers and stinging vines, and their floral, fruity omega scents make me want to choke.

“Hold her,” Rachel says shakily, using her crutch to push back to her feet.

My lizard brain freaks.

I flail as more and more hands pin me down.

Fight. Run. Fight Run.

Rachel steps in front of me with a crutch in one hand and my bat in the other. “Know your place, *Darling*.”

She swings the bat like a fucking battle axe.

The hit cracks across my face.

Lights.

Out.

I WAKE up to the smell of antiseptics and the orange blossom fragrance of the frantic beta nurse hovering over me in the infirmary.

“What year is it?” I croak out, hoping I’ve slipped into a coma and am now sixty-five years old and ready for retirement at sea.

“It’s—”

“Don’t start.” Evgenia clicks her tongue. “You didn’t miss the showcase.”

I tilt my head to find her when a throb hits so hard I gag. Pain that’d have me heaving if I had anything more than bile in my stomach.

“Stay still,” the nurse commands, steadying my shoulders.

When the agony passes, I don’t try turning again. Evgenia can hear me from wherever. “Looks like your understudy needs an understudy.”

“You’ll be fine. Nothing a little stage makeup can’t cover.”

I’d snort if I weren’t positive it would split my head like a rotten pumpkin. “It hurts to blink. There’s no way I’m dancing.”

“Well…” The nurse hesitates, and my stomach drops.

“Traitor,” I mutter.

“I’m so sorry, Lilah. But your scans don’t show any irreparable damage and Mr. Scorpio insisted, so…”

Scorpio?

I try to remember where I’ve heard that name, but my brain’s all pumpkin pulp and mush. “What about Rachel?”

Evgenia sniffs from her corner. “She’s in solitary with the others who attacked you. Evil girls, hitting you in your beautiful face.”

They could scrape off my face with a butter knife if it got me out of this dance. Just the idea of standing makes me groan.

“I’ll grab you some more pain meds.” The nurse scampers off, and Evgenia steps in, staring down at me with a critical eye.

“You cannot expect me to dance tomorrow.”

“You’re bruised, but I’ve seen you dance through worse.”

I think she means that as a compliment.

And yeah, once upon a time, I wouldn’t let anything stop me from dancing. Things change when you realize every second in the spotlight means another trip to the infirmary. “There’s no way.”

“You’ll find a way.”

“But—”

“I won’t let you throw away this opportunity. You have a chance to land a decent pack.”

Evgenia and I have a *waaaay* different definition of opportunity. She’s imagining a cushy life for me as some pack’s precious omega princess, but all I see is a future filled with bars and bruises. “I’d call this a trap.”

“Then consider yourself trapped.” She pats my arm in consolation. “And dance your omega ass off anyway.”

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THREE

ATLAS

THE LAST TIME we clusterfucked a mission so hard, Finn took three bullets and we damn near lost him. I promised myself.

Never again.

But here we fucking are.

My packmates sit around the conference table while I replay the insane footage that shows every wrong thing that went down tonight.

Hunter scowls, Jett watches with a cold expression that matches the dried blood spray across his face, and Finn—*fucking Finn*—sits low in his chair, swiveling back and forth and grinning like an addict who just scored a fix.

I can't blame him.

I blame myself.

I should've known he'd go off-book. I should've checked in with him before we went out. Made sure he was level.

Now I all I can do is agonize over the tapes and plan so this never happens again. I pause on the drone footage from the moment the first domino tipped.

We were hired to ambush a Redfang Cartel drug pickup in an isolated forest clearing. The plan starts textbook, the four of us camouflaged in perfect position for a quick kill when the Redfangs pull up. Erik Redfang

steps out of a black car with his bodyguards, and the suppliers hop out of their van.

It should've been easy.

But instead of taking the shot, our sniper jumps out of his tree.

In one fluid motion, he throws his rifle over his shoulder, drives a machete through a cartel soldier's jugular, and war whoops like a goddamned Highland warrior.

My pack brother, Finn—the copper-headed shit—watches the screen with a twinkle in his eye. "Play the part where I—"

"Shut up." Hunter claps a hand over Finn's mouth.

"You fucked this one up," I tell him flat out. "But so did we all."

I hit play.

After Finn drops the guy and pulls another knife, going for a second man, Hunter breaks cover. But Hunter doesn't have knives or even a weapon. *No.* Hunter dives into the fight unarmed, bare-knuckle-blasting our target's bodyguard in the face.

"He was reaching for his gun." Hunter runs fingers through dark, messy hair. "Bonehead move, okay? But Finn was fucked and I didn't have a shot."

The scene breaks into more chaos. Jett and I start firing from our positions, our target takes cover in his bulletproof car, and before we can finish dropping bodies, the surviving Redfangs tear away.

We're still picking off the last drug guys in alternating blasts of gunfire when Finn dives behind the wheel of their van. Jett, who's supposed to be the level-headed one, grabs shotgun, taking along the tablet that controls our tech.

Finn has too deep a death wish to ever be wheel-man. He plows through a bush, off-roading to follow the Redfangs' escape.

All the while, my commands crackle over the audio.

Ignored. Unacknowledged.

“Negative. Do not pursue. Hunter needs support. Finn! I repeat, do not pursue. Need backup on the ground.”

“I have him,” Finn insists. “I can run him into a tree before he makes the road.”

Meanwhile, Hunter’s pinned down by three guys, one’s going for his knife, and gunfire has me stuck behind a tree.

My gut roils.

I told myself our bond was fine. *The pack is strong*. But Exhibit A right here is all the evidence I need.

Our pack is fracturing. “You left us behind.”

The switch flips inside Finn, and in half a second, all his cowboy bravado bleeds to nothing, leaving behind a dead-eyed assassin who drops the room temperature to glacial.

This is the Finn who has more kill counts than any other Wyvern House agent. This is the Finn the stunts and fucking antics keep at bay. This is the Finn who doesn’t give a fuck that I’m his leader and we’ve been pack brothers since diapers.

“You had it under control,” he says flatly.

“And you?” I turn to Jett.

“It was a mistake,” he admits, dropping his gaze. “I was watching the screens instead of the ground. Didn’t want Finn going off solo.”

Reasonable.

Wrong, but reasonable.

This is exactly why we need our tech guy back, but my father has Orion grounded indefinitely.

“We should’ve called Nathan,” Jett says.

“No,” I bark, and my packmates spines’ straighten at the hit of alpha command I didn’t mean to slip. I clear my throat. “Orion’s spot stays open.”

“What if he’s never fit for duty again?” Hunter asks.

“He’ll be fit.” The fact that Hunter could even suggest—could even *think*—about replacing our brother tells me everything I don’t want to know.

“If—” Jett begins.

“No.” This time, the bark’s on purpose, and the command of their pack leader has my brothers’ jaws snapping shut.

I will not negotiate.

Orion is pack. If we’re not loyal to our own goddamned pack then what are we doing?

Orion didn’t ask to awaken as an omega. He didn’t even ask to be our pack’s omega.

But he is. He’s ours. Our mate.

Mine.

So we can keep his spot for as long as it takes for him to figure out his hormones. When he’s in control, he’ll be back, and the team will be that much stronger.

No fucking way am I giving his slot to Nathan.

The guys know their history. Orion and Nathan are biological brothers, and Nathan takes fucking glee in lording shit over our mate.

I’d rather remove the guy’s teeth with my fingers than trust him to have my back on a job.

Orion’s already going to be upset that we’re struggling.

I’ve disappointed him enough.

I won’t backstab him by cutting him from our squad without so much as a heads up. “Any chatter on containment?”

“The media’s running with the car chase,” Jett says.

“I made the shot,” Finn insists as if he didn’t make the shot *after* the choppers got there. So instead of an everyday case of road rage, the news is covering a gangland assassination where a masked Finn shoots the spine out

of our target in the middle of a bridge before base jumping off the side and disappearing into the water.

God save me from adrenaline junkies.

"Wyvern House will be implicated," Jett says.

Hunter *tsks*. "Fucking mess."

This isn't a mess.

It's a goddamned disaster.

As team leader, pack leader, and future leader of every single Wyvern House op and business, I'm the man who has to make it right. "Jett, get your people working on intel. Did the Redfangs recognize it was a Wyvern hit? Hunter. You're fooling no one with that shitty bandaging. Go patch yourself up. And Finn. Sauna. Find me when you're ready to talk."

Hunter grumbles like he thinks long sleeves are enough to hide the slashes. I can smell the blood. A thick, choking reminder of how dangerous tonight's close call was.

After my packmates leave, I replay the mission footage again and again. If this were any other team, I'd go over it frame-by-frame, pinpointing where the teamwork broke down and what strategies can improve their performance.

Our breakdown isn't on film.

It's somewhere else, somewhere deep inside the fabric of our pack, and when I finally pick apart the bloody threads, I know what I'm going to find.

It's my fault.

Even if it's not, it is.

I'm the one responsible for keeping us together.

I sit alone for too long, beginning to type up a mission report that makes me want to flip the table. Before I can splinter the conference room furniture, my father walks in.

Scorpio Wyvern drops down in the chair next to me.

His skin’s a shade deeper than mine, hair buzzed military clean. My father’s a big guy. Not bigger than me anymore, but he has this way—this aura. In black camo, he takes up the whole room.

His dominance and familiar musk wrap around me, half comforting, and half gut punch, because this is the one man in the world I can’t disappoint.

“You want to talk about it?” he asks.

“As my father or my commander?”

“Definitely father. Your commander’s gonna rip you a new one over this shit.”

I snort, and it’s almost a laugh. “I deserve it.”

“You know why I named you Atlas?” He tilts his head. There’s more salt and pepper in his dark hair lately.

It gives him a wisdom I hope I can earn someday.

“Because I carry the weight of the world.”

“No. Because I wanted you to know you’re *strong enough* to carry the weight of any burden you deem worthy. Not every burden’s yours to bear.”

“We just assassinated Dominik Redfang’s favorite younger brother on national news. It’s on me when he comes looking for revenge.”

“As your commander, I’ll be rip-shit over that later. We need to talk about your pack.”

A protective growl builds deep in my chest. “It’s not the time for that conversation.”

“Orion—”

“Dad,” I snap. “We’re mated. It’s done.”

“Orion’s a good boy. I’m not saying otherwise. But your pack’s in fucking shambles and he’s the root of it.”

Blood bubbles in my veins, and I grip the arms of my chair so hard the plastic screams. “I won’t listen to you speak that way about my mate.”

“Your loyalty needs to belong to your *whole* pack. As your commander...” he pauses long enough to make my throat clench. “I’m

pulling you off the mission roster and placing a secondary omega with your pack.”

I distinctly feel the sensation of being ripped in half.

Because no.

No way in fucking hell am I replacing Orion. I’ve wanted him my whole life and denied him just as long, all for the sake of our pack and the hypothetical future omega we planned to mate.

But Orion *is* that omega. We’re not replacing him.

And yet…

Just the thought, the *doubt*, yanks my heart.

Something’s wrong with our pack. Orion doesn’t smile, Finn’s acting manic, Hunter’s shooting me pity looks, and Jett won’t say shit about what’s eating his soul.

And me?

I don’t sleep. Can’t. My packmates’ anxieties scream along our bond like sirens, keeping me awake. I stalk the house at night, checking the window and door locks, investigating banging pipes and creaking wood like every sound is an assassin come to take revenge for all the blood we’ve spilled.

Orion sleeps alone.

Our pack bed’s sheets are always cold.

We were fifteen when I looked him in the eye and told him we had to shut down whatever was between us. It was unfair to the omega the five of us would grow up to share.

Our love had to be for her, and her alone.

Ten years later, Orion awakened as an omega instead of an alpha. At the first hit of his pheromones, I one-eightied. Claimed him as mine, and the four of us agreed to take him as our pack’s mate.

To throw him away now?

To tell him he’s being *replaced?*

I’m not *that* kind of monster.

“There has to be another way.” I scrub my hands through my hair, torn between two loyalties. Orion is my mate, but my father is my north star, the one who I’ve always followed, and he’s never led me astray.

“Maybe. How much time are you willing to take off to figure it out?”

“None.” Fuck. We don’t have time for this. The Redfangs will hit back hard.

“Then look into some other options.”

“I won’t replace him,” I growl.

“So don’t. The situation can be temporary, but Orion needs guidance, and the rest of you need to extricate your heads from your asses.” My father whips out his phone, and a message pings me. “There’s an event tomorrow. The female we picked you will be on stage.”

My phone shows an invite for four—not five—to tomorrow night’s dance showcase at the Omega Cultivation Center. The screen burns when I shove it back into my pocket.

“I won’t force you,” he says, “But what you’re doing isn’t working. The pack’s volatile. Any other team wouldn’t get a second chance.”

Shame burrows into my chest, the hot wave making my fists bunch and my teeth clench.

He may as well give me an ultimatum.

Lose my pack or lose my position?

I can’t survive without either.

“I’ll go. But no promises. We already have a mate.”

“Fair enough.” Scorpio stands, and the nurturing snaps out of him, leaving behind a hard-eyed commander staring down his incompetent subordinate. “I want that report in my inbox tonight. I’ll see your team on the field at morning call for punishment.”

“Yes, sir.” I press my hand to my heart in salute, and he walks out.

Alone again, I sink back in my chair.

My father never bluffs. I've known that in my bones since the day I mouthed off as a toddler and he confiscated my teddy bear.

Now I have so much more to lose.

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FOUR

LILAH

THE COOL THING about spending the next day in the infirmary is that it smells like rubbing alcohol instead of ragey omegas, and when I can finally sit up without puking, Nurse Betty brings me a plate for breakfast.

It's heaped with French toast, sausage, and fancy fruit salad—the kind with dragon fruits and rambutans that I absolutely cannot afford to be added to my ever-growing tab.

There's no free brunch at the OCC.

I mentally add another chunk of cash to my debt for the food, the overnight, and medicine.

As a rule, I don't fill my stomach. I don't dare let myself get to a healthy weight where my body could be like, *hey, aren't we supposed to be doing that puberty thing?*

This once, I sop up every drop of syrup with my toast and lick my fingers clean. I need my strength to heal this head wound and survive the recital from hell.

Knowing I'm a flight risk, Evgenia shows to drag me to the auditorium and sit my ass in one of the dressing room makeup chairs backstage.

Hair mostly covers the spot where Rachel hit her home run, but so much purple swelling bleeds onto my forehead that I need the heavy-duty

concealer. It’s not my first time hiding my hurts under foundation and powder.

It won’t be the last.

All I can do is brush over the marks, wing my eyeliner sharp enough to slit a man’s throat, and promise myself I’ll keep fighting.

Evgenia stops to hand over the hanger with my skimpy spandex costume, giving a curt nod at my expert bruise-hiding skills. “No one will notice.”

“Hope they don’t.” I’d happily blend into the back row, or better yet, ooze into the shadows and never make it to the stage.

“Oh, they’ll notice *you*. You’ll be in the arms of your forever pack before morning.”

I freeze, mid-blusher. Evgenia isn’t exactly a mother figure, but I can trust her not to bullshit. “What else have you been told?”

“Just that you’ll be graduating soon. It’s nothing to worry about. Any pack would be lucky to have you.”

Would they, though?

And why would I want *them?*

“I’ll graduate right now,” I mutter.

Evgenia tsks. “So you say. Wait until your first heat. You’ll be begging for your alphas to—”

“I know how it works.” I’ve taken the class, done the reading, and seen the omega “education films” that are just well-lit amateur porn. I know *exactly* what I’m in for.

An omega in heat is a mindless creature, all need and no logic. We crave sex and security. The bite of our alpha. Knots and sweet nothings.

It’s supposed to be bliss when you have it all.

The cozy nest and the pack of growly protective alphas bending over backward, sideways, and doggy style to make you scream and make you smile.

If they’re a scent match—your true, destined, meant-to-be-mates—you’ll spend your whole lives craving to be together, craving each other in a way that demands constant closeness and kisses. Their pheromones and attention melt you into goo, and yours turn them into loyal knights dedicated to satisfying your every need.

I know better.

That dream’s a sales pitch, and I’m not buying.

I don’t need a pack telling me I’m safe. I can make me safe. I can take care of everything by myself, without handing over my entire life’s happiness to a bunch of rutting assholes.

“I’ve been asked to make sure you attend the reception after the performance. Don’t be surprised if a pack gives you an offer.”

“They can’t. I’m not—”

“Not awakened. I know. But that’s easily fixed with a hormone shot. You can’t delay the inevitable.”

My vision tunnels and my heart slams my ribcage like it’s gonna punch free. I set the costume on the makeup counter. “I’m not dancing.”

“You are,” Evgenia insists. “The Center’s director is coming to watch.”

I glance at the curtain, calculating. Will it be too obvious if I go down hard enough to snap my collarbone in the first ten seconds?

“No. *No.*” Evgenia waves, bringing me back to reality. “I know that look. You will not sabotage tonight for yourself or anyone else. Some of these girls are trying to make a good impression. Don’t hurt their futures just because you’re afraid of yours.”

“I wouldn’t…” But yeah. I definitely would.

Evgenia huffs. “Walkthrough in twenty. I want to see your solo one more time before curtain.”

I regret the morning’s French toast when it feels like everything’s going to come up, my whole future at risk, my fate uncertain.

I'd say fuck it all and run, but two big beta guards posted at the backstage door clock me the second I try to sneak past.

All I can do is dance.

When I join the team on stage for the walkthrough, the vibe is less hostile without Rachel and her drones. The other girls sneer, but they're the type to be so worried about themselves they don't have time to come after me.

My head aches through the practice. I crush a few extra painkillers, and if I happen to pass out on stage…

Yeah. That might be my best possible outcome.

Too soon, the auditorium fills. The buzz of conversation grows louder and louder, deep alpha voices rumbling and stirring up my instinct to run and hide. I plug my nose, blocking out their scents while the dance team girls giggle, leaning into the pheromones and picking out their favorites.

We're not up until the final performance. It gives me plenty of time to pick a hiding spot, but Evgenia finds me like a ballerina bloodhound and drags me out of the bathroom just before curtain.

I take my place, vibrating with tension and dread, my head aching and ringing like someone's chipping the inside of my skull with a pickaxe.

Then the music starts and it all fades away.

The ache and the bruises. The bitchy omegas and all the choking, heavy alpha scents. There's only me and the beat.

I move like this is my last slice of freedom.

Because maybe it is.

I can feel the sounds in my soul, and I don't hedge or fake or hide. I run through the moves like they're mine. Like they came to me in a dream and only I can bring them to life.

When the music shifts, the dance team backs off, and the cursed spotlight calls me to the center of the stage.

There’s no more hiding. No other dancers to get lost in. No protection from the searing sets of eyes watching me from the darkness. Their gazes rake my skin. Alpha pheromones bleed across the stage, sticking in my throat until I can’t take a full breath.

The room spins.

I keep moving, moving, trying to grab onto something to make the world stop churning.

That’s when I feel a point of warmth in the crowd. Up in one of the private boxes.

Mid-dance, I falter, my body swinging to face whoever’s sitting up there.

Horrified, I correct before anyone notices, but the pull doesn’t disappear.

I want to stare.

I want to leapfrog people’s heads, claw my way up the wall, and find out who the fuck is drawing me so hard. I’ve never felt anything like it.

I don’t like things I don’t know.

I have to escape. I crave dark spaces and thick blankets, not eyes that want me and alphas who want to take away my future.

When the music finally cuts, I run.

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FIVE

ATLAS

I HAVEN'T BEEN to the OCC in years. I remember why as soon as I step out of our truck.

Omega.

There are hundreds of scents. Fresh and raw. Sweet, sultry, musky. Every flavor.

None smell like *mine*.

I fix Orion's crisp apple scent in my brain. Instinct wants me running inside. My quads bunch, my muscles firing.

It shouldn't be like this.

I have an omega.

Our pack has an omega.

"Holy shit." Finn bounces on his toes, switch flipped back to wired.

"This'll be an adventure." Hunter adjusts himself in his suit pants, locked onto the auditorium building.

"*Focus,*" I bark. "We're not shopping." The two of them nod, but they're still looking hungrily at the source of these maddening scents.

It *really* shouldn't be like this. Orion wears our bites. The pack is complete.

But these scents are screwing with me. Making me restless, fingers twitching, and I'm not the only one.

Jett looks cool as ever, but there's a wildness in his eyes and a thrum along our pack bond. I grab his arm with one hand, and Finn's with the other. Hunter does the same, pulling us into a tight square.

Connected, we all settle.

I take my first deep breath in what feels like hours, sending reassurance through our bond.

This isn't the first time my father's come for our pack. It's not even the first time he's thrown us a new member. The dads thought adding a beta would even us out. Craig will never be pack, but we keep his ass around as an assistant just to keep the dads off ours. This girl is no different.

She'll never be one of us.

"We're going to jump through this hoop and pass the dads' test. That's all. We'll prove that our pack can handle its shit."

Jett relaxes the tiniest fraction.

"It shouldn't be like this," Hunter mumbles.

I hope we're not feeling the same thing—the pull that shouldn't exist, the draw toward whatever's inside that building that has me fighting the instinct to turn and barrel the fuck through the crowd.

"Stay together," I instruct. "We look, then we leave." I lead inside and the guys flank me. Every step feels like a betrayal, but obligation keeps me moving forward.

I'll do anything to keep the pack together.

Even this.

The OCC complex is massive, and so is the main auditorium. Their security guys tense when they spot us rolling up with our not-so-concealed weapons. Hunter flashes an ID that sends them hopping back and spluttering.

They know who we are.

We step inside, and the crowded lobby goes quiet.

They *all* know who we are.

“In and out,” I remind the guys.

An usher takes us to our seats in a private box that overlooks the theater. The ceiling’s painted with clouds, but we may as well be in hell.

“My father’s here,” Jett mutters.

And there’s the demon.

Hikaru Wyvern lords over the show from the box across from us. He looks like an emperor, gazing coldly down at the kingdom he controls. He’s my father’s pack brother, technically my uncle, but nothing says *family* when his gaze pierces us.

“Ignore him.” I keep Jett close. No matter how chill he looks on the outside, long dark hair tied back, his tailored suit fresh, I can feel him coming apart at the seams. I pull out his pocket square and force it to his nose. “Breathe into that.”

“This is barbaric,” he says, voice muffled through the cloth.

“I know.” I can barely manage in the choking cloud of omega scents, so of course he’s losing his shit.

We’re too visible in the box, the crowd in the seats below peeking up, whispering *the Wyverns*, *the Wyverns*. As much as I want to tear out of here, we can’t make a bad impression.

Scorpio taught me that lesson with his belt.

My manners reflect on him. My behavior reflects on him. Everything I do reflects on him.

And everything *we* do reflects on Wyvern House.

The smallest insult to our reputation could destroy the business and ruin the hundreds of lives, the families who depend on our work. The people we can save where the military and police fail.

Wyvern House first.

But my instincts are torn.

Half of me says protect the pack. Take Jett home and get Orion in my arms. We don’t need this bullshit.

Instead, I sit in my chair, taut and furious, buzzing from strange pheromones.

Fucking *finally*, the lights go down and the music rises. The program starts with dances from toddling ballerinas who only know they're omega from their blood tests, then the pre-teens in pre-awakening stage, and the older teen and twenty-something omegas who're hitting their perfume.

And hitting *us* with their perfume.

They look too young and they smell too sweet. Like little powder puffs flouncing across the stage. Dozens of scents and not one is tempting.

All they do is make me yearn for Orion's rich apple taste on my tongue. His mature sweetness.

Hikaru catches my eye before the final performance, giving me the nod.

When the upper-level dance team struts out, my body goes rigid.

She's there.

The omega who wants to break up my pack.

The omega the dads think will fix us when all she's going to do is zero in on every strained, fraying thread of our pack and tear us apart at the fucking seam.

I already hate her.

Then the music kicks on.

A dozen girls move across the stage, but she's the only one I can see. She's tiny. Delicate. More eyes than body, with luscious brown hair that makes me wonder if she tastes like chocolate mousse.

And these juicy rosebud lips I want to feel wrapped around my—

No.

Absofuckinglutely not.

Hunter leans over the balcony, straining to take her in. "That's her?"

"Pretty," Finn says breathily, his eyes sparkling.

I can't deny she's beautiful. The way she moves, that lithe little body twisting and bending…

I tip my head back, staring at the ceiling, but my hard cock already sees something he likes.

Fucking traitor.

“Look.” Hunter nudges me, handing over his phone with the digital program pulled up.

Her name’s Lilah Darling.

Only the Center’s wards are named Darling. So she’s either an orphan or her family fucking sold her.

“Lilah,” Jett chokes.

I lock on to her photo.

She has huge, haunted grey eyes.

It’s a terrible picture. Her skin’s swollen, her hair a tangled mess. No makeup or coy smile like the other omegas. She purses those rosebud lips in a nasty scowl.

Her bio lists her hobbies as forensic financial accounting and shiv whittlin’—her spelling.

“Unawakened.” Hunter points to the key piece of info.

She’s twenty-three and hasn’t even gone into pre-awakening.

“Makes sense the dads flagged her.” She’s bizarre, damn near a spinster for an omega, and if she never awakens, she’ll stick the OCC with her debt.

I’m still not buying the “secondary omega” line of bullshit. What pack would dare keep two when they’re so rare?

Scorpio, Hikaru, Kieran, and Max, the four founders of Wyvern House never found their fated omega. They had me and my pack brothers through surrogates, and we all grew up chasing the dream of a single unified pack and an omega who’d give us blood-related heirs.

Science says male omegas could evolve to bear children, but that’s a dream a long way off.

Bottom line, Orion can’t give us kids, and the dads are deep in their leave-a-legacy phase, obsessed with the four of us passing on their genes

and raising the third generation leaders of Wyvern House.

So they'll say we need mentorship and guidance when what they really want is to shoehorn a female into Orion's spot.

"You can't be considering taking her in," Jett grits out.

"Biting her into the pack? Never." She's a strange little doll, and no amount of parental pressure could make me betray Orion.

But our problem with the dads isn't going away.

"She's a *Darling*," Hunter says, always seeing the heart of the issue.

The girl's practically a throwaway, with no family to pay what she owes, and Hikaru the only legal guardian watching over her.

She'd be better off raised by wolves. They're more maternal.

Wyverns eat their young.

Then again, she's probably in on the dads' scheme. I have zero sympathy for yet another female trying to claw her way into our family. Finn almost died the last time our team fell for batted lashes and a sob story.

As much as I'd rather choke the girl out than even let Orion know her name, the sickly possibility keeps churning through my brain. "If we take her, we can keep the pressure off while we deal with the Redfangs. If she goes into heat before then, we toss her into rotation."

"She'd be in our *home*," Jett hisses. "You want her there with Orion? They'll claw each other to death."

"She's not awakened, and she's not competition. Unless you all want to be off duty for the next six months to forever, we need to bring her in. We'll stash her in the basement and ignore her while the dads leave us alone."

"That's shitty," Hunter says, watching the girl with a dangerously soft look in his eye.

I won't look at her. I refuse to. But I feel her moving at the edge of my vision like a feather brushing down my spine. "We're saints compared to the packs she'll end up with if all Hikaru cares about is earning back her debt."

“I want to play with her.” Finn’s eyes glitter like pools at midnight, and for the first time, I have no idea if he’s in dark mode or running high. Maybe a little of both.

Dangerous.

“Vote. Do we offer her a temporary place in the house?” I turn more harshly away from the stage, ignoring the way the hairs on my arms spike when I put my back to her.

“No,” Jett says immediately.

“Hell yes,” Finn says.

“Yes.” I hate myself, but I say it anyway. I can’t let Scorpio sideline us.

Hunter takes the longest to decide, staring at the girl on stage. I don’t know what he sees, but he finally shakes himself. “It’s a terrible fucking idea, but yeah. As long as it’s temporary. We can’t afford to be off the mission roster right now.”

This is a means to an end, I remind myself as I type out a text to the dads. No doubt all four are in on the scheme.

> *Atlas: We’re not biting her. She’s out if she causes trouble or Orion says so. We have the right to kick her at any time for any reason. She only stays on a trial basis.*
>
> *Scorpio: I’m here. Hikaru and I will handle the offer personally. Do you want to meet her?*

I glance at my pack.

Hunter and Finn are mesmerized by the girl on stage, both big men leaning over the balcony like they’re being lured.

Finn probably wants to fuck with her.

Hunter’s all puffed up like a tattooed mother hen, itching to feed the girl a sandwich.

Meanwhile, Jett stares at nothing, as blank and pale as white paper, and I can't look too closely at my own gut-twisting urge to drink her in.

Atlas: We're going home. Have Craig make the arrangements.

I don't want to know anything about her. I don't want to *see* her. I don't want to have to look Orion in the eye and tell him that I made this happen.

"We're out." I stand. The motion snaps the guys out of their shit, and they march out of the box behind me. Jett moves like he's striding down death row. My other brothers put their heads close, whispering secret schemes, and Finn *sparkles*.

I keep my heart fixed on home.

And how the fuck I'm going to explain this goddamned train wreck to our mate.

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SIX

LILAH

EVGENIA KNEW I'D BOLT.

She waits in the wings and grabs my elbow before I can sprint back to my dorm room cave and lock myself in for the weeks it's going to take me to recover from tonight.

"Your lines were beautiful. You were beautiful. Now change for the reception," she says, already tugging me toward the dressing room.

"Not happening."

"No arguments tonight, Darling. This goes over both our heads." Evgenia puts her hands on her hips. In an elegant patterned wrap dress, with her dark hair slicked into a glossy chignon, she looks like a bougie dance mom. I'm not her kid, but backstage swarms with security and I can no more run than throw a tantrum.

I change because only in my nightmares would I go in public in this sheer, skimpy spandex. But I don't have a rack of couture cocktail dresses waiting for me like the other girls. All I brought were my OCC sweats. Most days, I rock around in them happily.

They keep me hidden. They keep me safe.

Tonight, they make me stand out.

Evgenia sighs at me before patting my shoulder and herding me to the atrium. The massive space is divided into clusters of couches, where each

omega holds her own court.

Every girl here is a princess in a sparkling gown. They're surrounded by their families and packs of suitors, smiling with big bouquets of garden-of-Eden flowers, the tables decked out with expensive bottles and fancy finger foods.

I'm led to an empty sofa, surrounded by empty chairs, and I wonder if it's twisted that I take comfort in the emptiness.

"I can't stay," Evgenia says after settling me in my seat. "But you'll have an offer tonight. Take it, no matter what. Opportunities like this never come twice."

She leaves me to be swallowed up by the dull roar of dozens of conversations, and a roomful of scents I want nothing to do with. I curl my knees up on the couch and hug them to my chest.

Maybe it's my grungy sweatsuit, maybe it's my face full of bruises, or maybe there's a subtle pheromone hanging around me that says *fuck off*, but either way, it's like a force field separates me from the rest of the room.

Not even the waiters come near. The only reason I know I'm not invisible is that the omegas in the closest seating groups take the time to sneer. Rachel glares from the far, far side of the atrium where she sits with her foot on ice and a crowd of hulking alpha admirers.

Solitary punishment doesn't last as long when you have bankrollers to bribe the trainers.

I'm hoping I spend the whole night alone.

Unseen and unbothered.

Although some water would be nice?

I peek above the couch, seeing if I can ask a waiter for an empty cup. That's when I spot the forces of nature headed toward me.

The room folds around the two men.

Every conversation cuts when they stroll past. Their footsteps move in sync, the telltale sign of long-time pack members. The waves of their

dominance make my blood flutter in the bad way that says I don't want this kind of attention.

I recognize the dark-haired man.

Hikaru Wyvern.

He owns the OCC.

He owns *me.*

He's a cold-faced, older man with sword-sharp brows and cutting cheekbones. He's not even standing close, but his dominance already has me wanting to roll over and show my belly.

The man at his side is even worse.

Built like three pasted-together linebackers, he has salt-and-pepper hair, a square jaw, and a take-no-shit attitude that has me sinking into the sofa cushions.

Please be here for someone else.

"Lilah." The silver fox action figure stops his floorboard-crushing steps directly in front of me. "I'm Scorpio Wyvern. You must've been waiting." He sheds alpha in pounding waves, his scent metallic in my throat. It's gunpowder and blood, aggressive and suffocating.

At least, at first.

I catch a hint of something sweeter clinging to his clothes, but I close it down hard. The sharp overtones that are all Scorpio are bad enough. I'd crawl under the sofa, but I don't dare show my back.

"I'm Hikaru Wyvern. I'll be standing in as your guardian for this discussion." The ice face takes my side of the couch like he's in my corner while Scorpio sits across the empty table.

He's my guardian?

This is my nightmare.

This is everything I knew would happen. I grip the cushion, trying to ignore the black static fuzzing at the edge of my vision.

“Relax,” Scorpio says, sitting like he’s in his war room instead of an atrium packed with hundreds of nosy eyes, all wondering what underground hellhole the poor pitiful Darling is about to be sold off to.

Hikaru snaps for one of the waiters. “Water.”

A few seconds later, a chilled glass is thrust into my trembling hands.

Bet Hikaru adds it to my tab.

I drink it anyway. I have to get my shit together. I’m not going to sit back and let them ruin what little hope I have left for my life.

It takes a few more blinks and deep breaths before I realize a third person has joined us. He’s thin in that weaselly kind of way, a brown-haired beta whose scent I can’t make out over the Wyverns who leave me gagging on metal.

“This is Craig,” Scorpio says as if I should recognize him. All I know is he has no surname, so no pack and he’s not the threat I have to worry about with two big alphas sucking up my oxygen while they count the money they’re going to get for selling me to slaughter.

Craig perks up, preening, only deflating slightly when I keep sipping my water, unimpressed.

Scorpio clears his throat. “We won’t waste your time. I’m presenting you an offer on behalf of my son’s pack.”

“No.” The word slips out before I realize who I’m talking to.

He hits me with a *who’s-in-charge-here* look that makes my lips snap shut and my spine snap straight.

“No one’s forcing you,” he continues, “we need to place a female omega with our sons’ pack. We’ve had you on our radar for ages.”

“But I’m not awakened,” I croak out.

This shouldn’t be happening, right? They can’t make a formal offer until I’m at least in pre-awakening.

“That’s why you’re our top candidate.” Hikaru pins me with his attention like a butterfly mounted to his wall. “Because of our sons’

circumstances, we'd prefer that hormones not play a role in the mating. You may legally be a minor because of your status, but given your age, we're confident you can make an informed decision. Whether or not you accept our offer, it's past time for you to be graduating."

I suck in a breath and choke.

Just like that, all my careful planning, all my sweat means nothing.

"I won't mate a pack." They can't make me.

"No?" Hikaru tilts his head. "You'd prefer to go into rotation?"

"Not that," I answer quickly. "I just want to be alone."

"Alone? An omega?" Scorpio looks at me like a puzzle he can't figure out. "You want such a painful life?"

If by pain, he means passing through heat without alphas to satisfy me… Well, I won't ever start having heats. And if he means loneliness? That's not a thing with me. "I've always been more comfortable solo."

"You seem to be forgetting your position here." Hikaru looks less concerned and more shrewd, with a dollar-sign glint in his dark eyes. "You can make whichever choice you like as long as it affords you the ability to pay back your training fees. Given the unusual length of time you've been with us, plus the cost of your original purchase… The amount is quite substantial."

The man is all business, but somewhere in those words, I know he's mocking me.

He's *for sure* threatening me.

Some fucking guardian.

"With our offer, that won't be a problem," Scorpio says. "If you can get the boys to accept you into their pack, your fees will be waived, and we'll set you up with a generous stipend."

"If they accept *me*?" That's not how offers work.

Alphas chase the omega.

Even when packs are so desired that multiple omegas are fighting for their attention, they understand that they're lucky to be considered.

No pack is *entitled* to an omega.

The ratio of alphas to omegas is something like 20:1 and always rising in our favor. Omegas might be commodities, but we're goddamned precious ones.

Or so I've been told.

Scorpio clears his throat. "That's exactly why your terms are so favorable."

Which tells me nothing. I keep my tone professional enough to protect my ass, but *come-the-fuck-on*. "Your sons could have any omega. They won't want me."

Craig—silent, but somehow annoying me anyway—gives a sycophantic nod, watching Scorpio like a sunflower follows the sun.

He wears his brown hair a little too long. Like he wants it soft and floppy. Like he wants to look omega, all vulnerable and *take me.*

Gag.

Freaking alpha chasers. Every other trainer at the OCC is just like Craig. Like Trainer Brock who got booted for sneaking into the dorms after hours and trying to give underage omegas foot massages.

Craig licks his lips like he'd *die* to suck one of Scorpio Wyvern's combat-booted toes. I wish Scorpio would turn and give the guy the attention he's panting for, but Scorpio's too busy watching me with an alpha intensity that makes me want to fold myself into origami.

His forehead furrows. "The offer is generous."

And fishy as fuck.

"You won't receive another offer from a pack." Hikaru slides the paper closer. He might as well admit he'll block all other offers except the one that comes from his own son.

I push the paper away. “Then they can offer someone else. They’re not even here.”

What more needs to be said?

No one invites a person—even an omega—into their pack sight unseen. There’s too much risk of a pheromone clash that could spark fear, anger, disgust. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a scent is worth a million.

“It has to be you,” Scorpio insists. “Between your age, your performance, and frankly the way you aren’t caving, even though we all know you should. There’s no other omega up for this mission.”

Mission?

A mating’s a marriage, not a diamond heist.

“But—”

“If you refuse,” Hikaru interrupts, “you’ll be chemically awakened and put on offer for mating. When no pack makes you an offer high enough to buy out your debt, you *will* be placed in rotation as of your first heat. Unless you’ve secured another source of funds?”

A high, hateful omega growl builds from the base of my soul, rumbling and bubbling with a lifetime’s worth of fear and frustration.

If I ever let myself imagine my dream proposal—which *thank the goddess*, I didn’t—it wouldn’t have gone down like this.

No words of love.

No promises or gifts or affection.

Hell, no mates. The assholes are having their fathers make the offer.

Honestly, it’s exactly what I’ve always expected.

Further proof that I’m an asset and not a person.

My body isn’t even my own.

Not awakened? *No problem.*

We’ll stick you full of this toxic hormone cocktail and force your awakening in a way so painful they give omegas a stick to bite. No painkillers, because those could negate the effect.

A fucking *stick*.

Oh, and no doubt they'll add the cost to my debt.

Assholes.

I grab the paper that says how much I'm worth.

And fucking choke when I see the number of zeroes the Wyvern pack is willing to shell out for my omega ass. Then I keep reading and can't even breathe.

Lilah Darling, "the Omega," hereby agrees to join the Wyvern pack on a temporary basis, terminating wardship with the Omega Cultivation Center "the OCC."

The Wyvern pack assumes responsibility for the Omega's debts, forgiving them in full, under the following conditions:

The Wyvern pack and its current members may exile the Omega at any point for any reason prior to the bestowal of a mating bite. Upon receiving the pack leader's mating bite, the Omega becomes a fully initiated member of the Wyvern Pack, receiving all corresponding status and benefits.

Upon exile, the Omega returns to the custody of the OCC, retaining all debt and relinquishing all assets obtained from the Wyvern Pack.

Signed by Scorpio, Hikaru, Kieran, and Max Wyvern on behalf of Atlas, Jett, Finnegan, Hunter, and Orion Wyvern.

Instead of writing out the gajillions in assets the pack must own, they write one simple line that implodes my brain.

As a fully initiated member of the Wyvern Pack, the Omega receives access to and equal share in all Wyvern Pack accounts, assets, and properties.

I expected some clause requiring that I'm always sexually available. That I have to walk around in skimpy lingerie, ready to please the alphas who own me at all times.

But this.

This is an actual *good* offer.

The kind omegas dream about.

I read it again and again. I can ignore the bullshit about the assets because those will never be mine, and I never wanted a pack to shower me in empty cash and prizes.

The more I read, the more I like.

Mainly, *terminating wardship* and *may exile the omega at any point for any reason.*

No sane pack would throw away their omega, but this one worded the option into their contract.

Maybe because I'm an unawakened dud, but my instincts say this mess goes deeper. Because *signed on behalf of* is total bullshit.

The five of them should be here.

"As your guardian, I strongly advise you to sign," Hikaru says.

"If I sign, you won't force me to take the shots?" That's essential to the plan I'm already forming. Because as long as I'm legally off of the OCC's ass, I have options. "And we don't have to mate?"

"You'll be a temporary pack member until you accept the pack leader's bite." A smug little smile sneaks to the corner of Scorpio's mouth. "And no chemicals. We don't want to hurt the future mother of our grandchildren."

Fuck's sake.

That's what this is about?

I should've known. They need a breeder.

Because isn't that the only thing omegas are good for?

The bullshit makes my decision that much easier.

I can't breed if I'm not *fertile*. But I won't mature. I won't ever go into heat.

That's for damn sure.

I can hide with these assholes for years. A temporary member of the pack, all of them waiting for me to awaken, waiting to breed their sow.

In the meantime, I'll figure out how to run.

Steal a few of these assets they keep talking about.

Maybe make a deal with them. Maybe just disappear.

If they’re going to treat me like a fucking object, I’ll treat them like my bank account.

Fuck ‘em.

“Where’s the pen?”

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SEVEN

ORION

WITH MY HEAT delayed until who-the-fuck-knows-when, I'm jumpy, cranky, and all I want to do is leap into Atlas's arms and bury my face in his neck the second he comes home.

That would stop the itch under my skin, the twitch of these fucking hormones that keep my brain spinning like the Ferris wheel from hell.

Where are they?

Who are they with?

Are they disappointed I can't help with the mission?

Are they *happy* I can't help?

Are they sniffing after other omegas, regretting their choice to take me as the pack's mate?

Maybe my mates are sitting at Wyvern House HQ, planning how to cut me loose. Because there's no point having a male omega who can't give them children, let alone *me* who's so fucking useless I almost got Finn killed.

It's fine.

They'll just kick me out of the pack, maybe welcome in perfect NATHAN instead. My brother's the tech genius I'm not. An alpha who's the perfect fit for their missions.

Oh, and he also loves pussy.

They can pick a perfect new omega together. Have a perfect pack and a perfect family.

Without me.

The endless thoughts wind me up so tight I'm shaking.

I curl into the pack bed, breathing in the balled-up shirts I stole from my mates. As pack leader, Atlas has the muskiest, most dominant scent. It's familiar and sexy, like broken-in leather and tonka bean, instantly calming my racing heart.

I groan.

Being an omega is bullshit.

All these thoughts and instincts. I feel like a needy gremlin half the time. There's no way I'm ever showing my pack how deep the madness goes.

If I can't give them kids, I have to at least pretend to have my shit together and not drag them down with me.

The sound of a car engine jerks me out of my downward spiral.

They're back!

Finally. I've been losing my ever-loving shit.

I jump up, instincts screaming to sprint and throw myself at all of them at once.

No fucking way.

I straighten the sheets, brush crumbs off the bed, and toss their stolen shirts into the hamper. The scent of my desperation soaks the room, but at least now it won't be so obvious I spent the entire weekend without them wallowing in their scents, housing chocolate, and holding back hormonal tears.

They should've been home yesterday. All I got was a *we're fine, we're in trouble again* text, then nothing.

Nothing!

Calmly, so fake fucking calmly, I walk downstairs to the foyer.

I can hear them talking on the way inside.

I let out a breath. *Thank god no one's hurt this time.*

Atlas enters first.

He's power in motion, huger and hotter than ever with a collared shirt stretched over shoulders so broad he makes my greedy asshole twitch. He dominates the room, and all I want to do is wrap my legs around his waist, grinding and whining until he drags me to the pack bed and fucks me brainless on his knot.

"Orion." He stalks to me, checking me up and down. Just feeling his eyes on my skin, knowing I have my alpha's attention is enough to settle my crazed nerves. Sexy stubble covers his defined jaw, and his broad nostrils flare when he spots me.

When his broad palm settles over my shoulder, I feel like myself for the first time in days. Atlas kisses my forehead, wrapping me in his musky leather scent.

More.

I need more.

"Do you have a minute?" he asks like I'm his business partner instead of his blood-bound mate. "We have something to talk to you about."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say, thin and panicky.

Does he notice the hysteria?

"Good." Atlas pats my head and walks away.

The comfort of his touch evaporates, leaving me alone in the whirlwind of doubt.

I feel fifteen again.

The drunken sleepover where Finn dared us to make out. I knew I liked Atlas, but I didn't realize I was fucking gone for him until I felt his lips on mine. The way he gripped the back of my head with firm fingers, hauling me against his body in a claiming so feral and possessive that he *owned me*

from then on. Even though my blood tests said I'd be an alpha, I knew we'd be together.

Except, the next day?

Atlas said it was a mistake.

We couldn't screw around if we wanted to form a pack with the guys and mate an omega.

It's been years since my surprise awakening, and I still feel like the second choice. The omega the guys accepted because we grew up together.

Not because they want me.

"Hey," Hunter says in a half-bark that dredges my attention out of the darkness. He smells like liquor and smoke, a heady shot of mezcal. I let myself breathe him in for a few seconds, trying to calm down.

Hunter's nearly as massive as Atlas, all toned muscle and bronzed skin with a teddy bear's soul. With dark hair long on the top and shaved clean on the sides, he's half fitness model, half tatted-up gangster, and deeply intense whether he's your enemy or your best friend.

He hits me with one of his soul-deep, *I can-see-through-your-bullshit* gazes. "You good?"

I don't bother answering. Hunter always sees too much. "How was the mission?"

"Fucking sick!" Finn pushes past him and scoops me up in greeting. "Shit went off at the drop site. Total bedlam. Ten out of ten would fuck with the cartel again." Finn keeps describing the guns he used and the guys he killed like an excited puppy instead of a special forces sniper. Seeing him happy, feeling his bright, electric energy, settles me down.

I can't let it bother me that his touch is only friendly.

We were bros for years before I turned omega with no warning, so other than Atlas, the guys only fuck me during my heat. Which is good—*so fucking good*—but always leaves me wanting more.

At least Finn and Hunter ask my permission to bang strange chicks.

They deserve to be satisfied.

As long as I don't have to *see* the guys screwing outside the pack, smell betas all over their skin, then I can keep my psycho shit mummy-wrapped and buried.

"Put him down." Jett steals me from Finn's arms. The lithe, long-haired alpha eases me to the ground, but quickly releases his touch.

Jett's eyes are dark, sparkling galaxies. Sometimes, I feel a spark between us, but his smile only goes so far.

I'm never sure. Does Jett genuinely like me?

Or does he just hate females so hard that I'm his only option?

When we're drunk on my heat pheromones, the five of us would fuck *anything* from a key lime pie to a tree bole, but when the madness dies, I'm always left wondering if our pack has chemistry or just convenience.

I don't even know if I *want* them all to want me, but my hormones are so fucked up that my switch is forever flipped to possessive bitch.

Either way, I melt under my alphas' attention. Having them here—all four of them back in the house, back in my territory—releases the tension that's been weighing me down for days.

They're assholes, but they're *my assholes*. My mates. My pack. "It was too quiet without you guys."

"There's been a development." Jett adds another hit to Atlas's *we have to talk* bomb.

"What's going on?" I feel dizzy. Like I'm untethered, all these hormones tearing me in five different directions. With things so unsettled vague between us all, there's no gravity. Nothing tying me down to the earth. For the first time, I realize the guys are out of their regular camo and combat boot uniforms. "Why are you wearing suits?"

Jett's the only one with his jacket neatly buttoned. Finn and Hunter are as rumpled as you'd expect, their hair fucked up and their sleeves rolled down.

I lean into Jett, nostrils flaring. He’s cedar and cherry blossom, a warm, sophisticated scent that’s a total mismatch to his icy outside. It’s usually a nice contrast to the other guys’ heavier scents.

Now there’s an undertone of something else. A whiff of something sweet, sugary, and so out of place that it makes my gut clench.

I want to say it’s not the scent of another omega—or *a lot* of other omegas—but a fancy dress party where I wasn’t invited?

Fuck.

Have they already picked my replacement?

“The dads are scheming again.” Jett’s gaze loses focus. “Just know that we’re on your side. Always.”

My heart swirls in my chest. I’m torn between devastation and *I fucking knew it.*

Their dads hate our pack.

My dad’s pretty fucking ecstatic about it because I’m bound to the Wyvern heirs for good, but he’s just Wyvern House’s tech guy, not one of the four founders.

My mates’ fathers grew up together, bled together, and left the military together to create Wyvern House. They even hired surrogates at the same time so their sons could grow up together.

The guys were raised like brothers, and it was the luckiest day of my life when they accepted me into their inner circle. Back then, the dads were on board with our plan. The five of us would form a pack and mate the perfect omega.

But then I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty-four, and unawakened with four hulking alpha best friends waiting on me to mature to finally lock down their pack.

And then the *audacity*.

I awakened as an omega.

Atlas bonded us before the dads knew what was happening. They were feral when they found out.

I remember the morning the five of us stumbled out of the nest, high on sex and the pheromones of my first heat. I was glowing, giddy after the rush of bonding, of finally feeling Atlas move inside me and earning his bite. Not just smug, but omega-smug, well-knotted and wearing the still-raw bites of my favorite people in the world.

All four dads were waiting.

They ripped their sons away like a stripper tearing off his G-string, leaving me alone to listen to the four lectures that echoed through the house, each one cutting out a different piece of my heart.

Scorpio's words stabbed the deepest.

"Do you understand what you've done?" he growled. *"There'll be no balance to this pack. It's not what any of your packmates wanted, but did you stop to ask them, Atlas? Did you once think about your futures before you started rutting into that boy?"*

That's when I realized I was the pity mate.

The thing that pisses me off most?

Scorpio's right.

All the dads are right.

I'm not good enough for the guys. But goddamn it. They're already mine and I'm not giving them up, even if I'm a shameful fucking disaster.

They are *mine*.

After a mission, we always reconvene in the kitchen to decompress, but when I walk into the room, the tension thickens until it feels like I'm drowning.

Even Finn is stressed, twisting a fisted hand like he's hitting the gas on his bike.

The same Finn who, after barely surviving a spray of gunshots to the chest, asked the doctors to stitch him up so his scars healed like a shark bite.

That Finn is so serious he's tweaking.

"Just tell me." I lean against the back of a tall barstool, braced for the blow I know is coming.

I try to meet Atlas's eye, to pick up a hint, or the tiniest bit of reassurance, but he turns away.

Rejection washes over me hard. I grip the stool until my knuckles crack.

How bad is it if he can't even *look* at me? "Are the dads making me leave the pack?"

"What? No!" Atlas's head snaps up.

"It's fucked that you think we'd let that happen, O," Hunter says.

I shrug.

What am I supposed to expect after years of comments from the dads? Years of them throwing other omegas in my mates' paths? Jamming fucking *Craig* into our house and our lives.

I knew something bigger was coming.

"They're sending us an omega. A *female*," Jett hisses. The hate in his voice is the only thing that keeps me from spinning off into space.

"You agreed to this?" I see nothing but Atlas, my big strong pack leader who only shuffles his feet.

I wonder if I should walk away.

I mean, I can't, we're bound and they're it for me forever. But would they all be happier if me and my hormones just fucked off and never came back?

"Kind of," Hunter says, breaking the tension. "We screwed up the mission. Scorpio gave us an ultimatum. It's her or a permanent vacation."

"And you chose her." My voice sounds miles away. That's probably the only reason they don't realize I'm panicking, my breathing high and shallow, a soft whine building that I'll kill myself to suppress.

They chose *her*.

Of course.

Of course they chose her and not me.

“She’s not awakened,” Atlas says like that should numb the knife cutting open my spinal column. “We can’t take a break when we’ve pissed off the cartel. I made it clear we won’t bite her and we can kick her out at any time. For any reason. It’s a temporary evil.”

“I’m just supposed to stand aside?” Watch her pant over Atlas and charm the guys with her magical omega vagina?

“I say we have fun with her first.” Finn’s sparkle is another brick to my face. “Then cut her loose. She’s gotta be a bitch if she’s signing up to poach mates.”

“Probably desperate,” Hunter says. “Thinks she can wiggle her ass and land Wyvern Pack.”

“Desperate’s my favorite flavor.” Finn licks his lips.

I’m going to be sick.

I need to be in Atlas’s arms, but he stands so rigid there must be a rod up his ass.

He won’t look at me.

He *still* won’t look at me.

A whine clogs the back of my throat. I choke it down.

It’s Jett who touches my shoulder, grounding me.

“We’ll drive her away,” he assures me. “You don’t even have to meet her.”

Her.

Just the thought has me working overtime to bite back a growl of challenge.

God fucking help me.

I’m going to tear this bitch’s throat out.

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EIGHT

LILAH

AFTER I SIGN AWAY my future, Scorpio and Hikaru disappear like smoke and any dream I had of living a life unnoticed. Craig stays, I assume for a specific reason, but all he does is sit on his hands, looking me up and down.

“Are you sure you’re an omega? You don’t smell like one.”

Now that he’s not overpowered by alpha, Craig smells like wet cardboard and damp newsprint.

If he were a color, he’d be beige, and being under his critical stare almost makes me wish I was awakened. If I were, I could tell him to do anything and he’d pant all over me, just like he did with Scorpio.

Then again, *ew.*

No thank you.

I don’t need pheromones.

I might’ve signed on the dotted fucking line, but today is not the day I cave to some rando beta. There’s no need to be here, surrounded by omegas who want to shiv me for breathing the same air as our Wyvern overlords.

The need to curl up in my nest is strong. Sliding off the couch, I head for the exit.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Craig snatches my wrist.

His touch sends cockroaches swimming through my blood, coating me in wet cardboard that's more rotted close-up. Like climbing inside a hot dumpster.

My instincts kick in.

I break his grip, quickly skipping away, putting the sofa between us. "You don't get to touch me."

"Sit down and listen when I talk to you." Craig gives a little growl that lifts the hairs on my arms.

Beige and skeezy he may be, but Craig is a threat.

I don't ignore my instincts.

They've been honed from years of shady beta trainers.

Trainer Brock and his foot fetish. Trainer Ethan with his not-so-casual touches. Trainer Isaiah, who everyone thought was an angel, but was actually a mole who infiltrated the OCC to groom baby omegas for sex trafficking.

I knew they were crooked.

Not that anyone listens.

Craig gives me the heebiest of jeebies, and I never want to be alone with him. In this room, I may as well be, because there's not one person who'll step in to stop him from touching me again.

Like always, I protect myself.

Craig advances, his thin upper lip drawn back in a snarl. "You'd better respect me if you want to come into my pack."

"I *don't* want to." Were we not just at the same meeting where I was blackmailed? I glance over my shoulder, trying to find a clear path to the doors, but the floor's choked with big alphas and bitter omegas who want my scalp.

"Wyvern House appointed *me* the guys' beta. Orion couldn't even function without me. So don't get any fucking ideas about stealing the pack.

I'll be bitten in long before you are and you'd better believe I'm going to warn them what a nasty, disobedient girl you are."

He creeps closer, and *I can't.*

I can't deal with this level of batshit.

I take off, dashing between alphas and onlookers, sprinting for the main exit.

My instincts urge me to my nest. I want to curl up in my little dorm room, bolt myself in, and hide under every blanket. But that's the first place the trainers will look for me.

So instead, I head to my real home—the sports complex.

It's a ghost town with the showcase afterparty still hopping. I slip past the token security guard, and soon I'm diving into the water, down, down, down, until I can hug my knees to my chest, sitting like a statue at the bottom of the pool.

There's too much to process.

I can't even think it through until I'm underwater, not sucking in a new flavor of pheromone with every breath.

I have a pack.

A temporary pack, but I haven't met them and they're already everything I feared.

Bought me like a heifer? *Check*.

Belong to a scary underworld organization? *Check*.

Sleazy, egotistical beta on the pack roster? Fucking *check*.

I hold my breath until my lungs near collapse. When I finally kick to the surface, gasping a desperate lungful of chlorinated air, my head clears.

I'm not giving up.

My dream's a little cottage in the woods with no one to bother me, desire me, or hate me just for existing. I want to do bookkeeping online and drink hot cocoa in my herb garden. I want to start taking suppressants as

soon as I can get a black market prescription and be done with heats and hormones and men forever.

I just want to be left alone.

I want to feel safe for one fucking day of my life.

So I have to keep fighting.

I already know everything I need to know about this pack. They need heirs. I don't understand why they can't offer a reputable omega—a good little girl who'll beg to be with them—but they've kicked a fucking boulder by choosing me.

I'll play along so they keep me around. Dodge Craig and their advances. Keep busting my ass to stop myself from awakening, and find all the best hiding spots in whatever hideous McMansion these rich boys call home.

I'll do what I do best.

Be a ghost.

And before anyone notices, I'll disappear.

IN THE MORNING, Trainer Marc finds me sleeping in the locker room, curled up in a nest of towels.

He's beefy for a beta, with big biceps that try to make up for his lack of neck, and a scent that's so identical to the plastic mats they use in the weight room that I don't notice him until he's nudging my ribs with his sneaker. "Up, Darling. You're late."

I'm groggy, disoriented, but up I jump.

Trainer Marc doesn't screw around and I don't want my ass caned by a dude who can bench press four times my body weight.

"Late for what?" I shiver, realizing I slept in my damp swimsuit and nothing else. Or maybe not so much *slept* as passed out in. I haven't eaten since the infirmary French toast.

“Your ride’s here. Where’s your bag?”

Ride.

Bag.

Pack.

Oh shit. “They’re taking me *today?*”

“They’re taking you now. Put on some clothes.” Marc doesn’t move, waiting for me to strip down and give him a show.

Whatever I’m walking into today, I’ll be so fucking glad to be out of this hellhole.

I whip my grey sweats on over my suit and jam my bra and undies in the pockets. I’d leave them, but I’m done donating my unmentionables to the trainers’ spank banks.

Marc grunts. “Hurry up. And behave. Military pack’s not going to tolerate your shit.”

“You mean mercenary?” I don’t know *exactly* what Wyvern House does, but it sure as shit isn’t handshakes and parades.

“They were good enough to feed and clothe you all these years. Don’t be ungrateful.”

I am *so* grateful, especially when Trainer Marc stares at my ass the whole way outside. What a wholesome childhood I’ve had here. What a wonderful upbringing.

Although, in its defense, the OCC usually throws a big farewell party when an omega graduates to join their pack. The trainers give speeches, there’s cake and a sappy slideshow, and the lucky omega is sent to their happy new life in a flurry of hugs and tears.

Not us Darlings.

We just fade away.

Like Marisol Darling—my best friend until the morning her dorm room was just empty. We used to share food at lunch and fight off the mean girls

shoulder-to-shoulder. Then nothing. Gone. I haven't heard from her since, and no one will tell me where she went.

There's no party for me, either.

Marc drops me at the edge of the parking lot where Evgenia waits with a ratty duffel bag and a bittersweet smile. Craig leans against the side of a huge black SUV like a wannabe prep-schooler in khakis, tapping his toe like he's ready to crush me underneath.

He can try.

If he does, I'll show him my teeth.

"I packed your things." Evgenia hands me the bag. Holding my accounting books and all three outfits I own, it has plenty of space left inside. She pats my shoulder. "Take care of yourself."

My throat closes down.

I want to throw my arms around her and take what's probably the best, only hug I'll ever get, but Evgenia's not a hugger.

My inner omega might be a clinger, but she's never driven this bus and she never will. "Thanks."

"Get in." Craig jumps into the driver's seat and starts the car.

I wouldn't put it past him to make me run for it, so I scramble inside, climbing to the third row of seats.

I want distance between us.

So much distance.

I hope Evgenia didn't forget to pack the shiv I keep under my pillow.

The interior reeks of cardboard Craig. I can just barely pick up on more scents underneath, but they're faded, old, and my senses aren't as sharp as an awakened omega's.

It's surreal as we fly down the OCC's manicured drive, finally passing through the spike-tipped iron gates. I'm an expert at sneaking around campus, but I've never snuck off.

I've only left a handful of times since my mother sold me.

Maybe being out in the big, wide world will feel freeing someday. For now, I hug my bag and curl up, making myself small in the back seat as I watch the unfamiliar city fly by and plug my nose to keep from inhaling Craig's scent.

I'm trading one prison for another, but I'm going to survive.

Somehow, I always survive.

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NINE

LILAH

I CAN'T APPRECIATE the scenery as Craig drives us out of the city. It's all a blur of trees and big sky until at least an hour later when he turns down a country road and stops to punch in a code. The iron gates swing open.

We must almost be there, but we stop again. Another gate, another code for me to memorize.

Then the house appears.

Turns out, the road is a long-ass driveway.

We're here.

Here being a freaking three-story mansion complete with whimsical ivy-choked pillars that make me feel a million miles away from my dream cottage in the woods.

Rich packs all have country manors.

The other omegas were always lusting over real estate. Underground nests, swimming pools, and gourmet kitchens. I like nice things as much as the next girl, but I don't for a second think of any of this as mine.

"Get out," Craig barks, beta-style with zero power but plenty of catty attitude. "The alphas are waiting for you." He licks his lips, almost bouncing as he glances toward the house.

I'd rather disappear into the tree line and live in a cozy cave somewhere than step a single toe onto this pack's territory. I'd rather run for *days* and

keep running until my feet bleed.

But I climb out of the car.

I have no other choice.

An ominous vibe hangs in the air.

I don't know if it's a scent or an instinct, or maybe the mansion's just haunted, but as soon as my toes touch the ground, my muscles lock like I'm dangling at the edge of a hell portal.

"You're not allowed to use the front door. Your room's in back." Craig stomps toward a huge garage filled with candy-colored cars but doesn't go inside. He walks around on the grass, pausing when I don't follow. "You're not fooling anyone."

I'm just trying to breathe, trying to understand what has my body shivering, on the verge of a full-on meltdown. Craig can go sit on one of his alphas for all I care. "I'm not *trying* to fool anyone."

Craig snorts. "Like you won't be climbing into Atlas's lap in thirty seconds? This scared act isn't going to work. Nobody's going to chase you. The guys don't even want you here. They're only putting up with you because of their dads. I give it a week before you're slinking back to the hole you came from."

What is it with low-tier betas feeling the need to put me in my place? I *know* my place. Better than they do.

I would LOVE to slink back to my hole. It's comfy there, with books and snacks instead of beta bastards and asshole alphas.

I'm pissed enough to shake off whatever aura makes the mansion feel so foreboding. I sling my duffel across my shoulder and follow Craig onto the grass, keeping a few feet of buffer between us. "Just show me where to put my stuff. I don't need to meet the pack."

"You're meeting them," he huffs. "They need to lay down the law."

I shiver. I mean, I'm expecting these guys to be assholes, but I have a feeling they're going to surprise me with new levels of bullshit.

It takes a while to walk around the massive property. Craig points to two metal doors in the ground, like the storm cellars I've only seen in movies. "That's your room."

Fine. Sure.

Like I said, a hole in the ground sounds fantastic right now.

I drop my duffel and keep following. Craig leads us away from the house, back toward the *sprawling* gardens. That's a word I don't use too often, unless I'm sprawling on my bed in my pajamas reading shifter romances.

This place is insane. It's so green.

I'm gaping at the flowers when pressure tingles between my shoulder blades. I turn to find the house looming behind me.

A figure stands at the third-floor window.

A shadow that makes my ribs squeeze and my skin burn.

But the curtain flutters and they're gone.

"Don't look at the house. Don't even *think* about the house." Craig snatches my arm, dragging me behind him, and this time, I can't catch my feet, can't shake free of his angry fingers.

He drags me to a fancy gazebo, dropping me on the steps. I stumble, hands landing on the floor, knees banging the stair.

Four big alphas stare down at me like the cockroach who just skittered in through a crack under the door to ruin their tea party.

I'm upwind, so I'm not choking on them yet, but when the pack leader steps forward, every muscle in my body locks.

He's built for ripping tires in half, with the broadest shoulders I've ever seen, a thick barreled chest, and rugby thighs that taper down into combat boots. His toes stop a few feet in front of my face.

If he were anyone else, I'd lie here and let him enjoy his dominance play until I could slink away and make sure I never cross his path again.

But this alpha has too much control over my fate, and thanks to Craig, I already look so fucking weak.

I scramble to my feet, climbing the stair.

I can't meet them at eye level, because *holy tall*, all four of them, but I can at least look them in the eye. Or I could if I could look away from the pack leader.

It's a full-body experience when an alpha gives you his attention.

Not just a look, but their *full* attention.

My trainers said I'd feel the urge to preen. That I'd sink into myself and feel seen. Protected and loved and all those good sappy things.

I feel *seen* all right.

This alpha sees every inch of me from my shabby sweats to my bruised forehead and my involuntary cringe, because the closer he comes, the more I need to run.

Run and hide and never come out of my hole again.

When he steps forward, I step back, moving down the stairs.

"Stop," he barks.

The command locks my joints and stills my lungs. My gaze snaps to his face.

Fuck, he's beautiful.

Furious and beautiful.

His eyes are brown and maybe gold, and I shouldn't want to climb him to see, because they're shooting fire like he wishes he could incinerate me. Burn my corpse to smoking ash.

He's rugged. Dark hair and skin with thick, sexy eyebrows, thick arms.

Just thick all over.

Makes me wonder what else is *thick* and—*holy hell*!

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I take another step back. Only now Craig's standing behind me. When I bump into his chest, I jump like he just grabbed my ass, springing back into

the gazebo with the firing squad of angry alphas.

I would introduce myself, do something to break this icy silence, but I can't. I literally cannot move a muscle, even to open my mouth, hypnotized by the pack leader and his suffocating, world-erasing dominance.

"I'm Atlas," he announces. "Hunter, Finn, Jett." He nods to his boys standing behind him in a half-circle, each more devastatingly handsome than the last. I don't dare spend more than a nanosecond on Jett because he'd explode my ovaries and I swear his profile looks familiar.

They're missing their fifth. *Orion?*

He's already my favorite because he's not here glaring like he wants to rip my head off and drink mimosas from my severed skull.

The pressure they're throwing crushes like the deepest ocean trench. I'm sweating, and I can barely stand up straight.

It isn't fair how easily they can dominate me.

Just because they're alphas. Just because I'm an omega.

I grit my teeth and force my head up high, tapping into the willpower that pushes me to run marathons on empty and kick my own ass on the daily. "I'm Lilah."

"Here's the deal." Atlas folds his arms over his broad chest, and it takes everything I have to not to lick my lips. "You will *never* be a member of this pack. You're welcome to stay as long as you stay out of our way. We'll stay out of yours. Don't go into the house or go looking for Orion. We'll kick you straight back to the OCC the second you step out of line." He looms like he's waiting for me to cry. To fall down in a pathetic, weeping puddle.

The red-headed alpha, Finn, *bounces* watching me get cut down like he's a kid on Christmas morning.

But I'm the one unwrapping all the presents. "You won't bite me?"

"*Never*," hisses Jett, the dark-haired, demonic beauty who can't even look at me without clenching his cut jaw.

“Then I’ll stay out of your way. I didn’t exactly volunteer for this.”

Craig scoffs behind me, but I’d rather forget he’s here.

I have more questions.

So many more questions, like why me, and why can’t Orion speak for himself?

But the wind shifts, blowing their scents straight into my lungs.

My blood turns to liquid fire.

I choke on the scents clawing inside me.

Leather. Smoke. Oranges. Cedar.

The little mouse I’ve spent my life beating down perks up from her long hibernation. Wide awake, she sends my body into a fever, ready to claim what’s ours.

Four alphas.

Mine.

My alphas.

But underneath, a fifth scent clings to them.

A sexy, cinnamony, crisp apple, frolicking-through-orchards-on-your-honeymoon kind of scent.

Too sweet to be alpha.

“You already have an omega?” I think I yelp, maybe shriek, but I’m not tracking anymore.

I’m lost.

Lost between need and despair.

Lost between instinct and the harsh reality that I can call them *mine* in my head all day, but they will *never* want me.

They already have their pack.

Their omega.

“Orion.” Atlas’s hardass exterior cracks. He can’t even say his mate’s name without slipping a sweet, gruff smile. But it flips back so fast when he remembers who he’s talking to. A warning growl rips up his throat. “You

don’t look at him. You don’t speak to him. You don’t even let him see your shadow. Understood?”

“I understand. I’ll go.”

Oh god. Please let me go.

I can’t breathe without breathing them in. Without the desperate, clawing, needy thing inside me rising up, begging me to claim them.

I have to go before my perfume betrays me even more than I just betrayed myself.

When Atlas nods, I fly.

I push past Craig and sprint through the garden.

But you can’t run from your fated mates.

Only I can because mine *aren’t* mine.

Maybe I waited too long, suppressed myself too long. They found another omega. One who’s not broken. One who’s not a coward like me.

I run into the woods.

I run like my demons are chasing.

I run, and this time, I don’t think I’m ever going to stop.

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TEN

JETT

“FOLLOW HER,” Atlas barks as the omega dashes off like an Olympic sprinter.

“I’ll send a drone.” I want her gone. Today. *Now*. I can’t have her here for a week, let alone a month or more.

This is the only place I can relax. My home with my brothers—the only people I trust.

Lilah.

Her name is the purest poison.

It forces me to remember the girl I refuse to recognize. That girl was sweet and smiling, but somehow always bruised and crying alone. I’d find her hiding in dark corners whenever I followed my father to work.

That Lilah had sparkles in her grey eyes.

I must have dreamed that girl.

This omega is sallow skin and jutting bones. Threadbare clothes and a disciplinary file filled with fights and confiscated weapons. Her eyes aren’t soft or sparkling.

They’re defiant. Angry. Terrified.

Just the way I feel.

She’s a relic from *before*.

Before Renee showed me there’s nothing sweet or pure about omegas.

They’re predators.

And fuck our history because Lilah is the latest in a string of sluts to come sniffing after my pack.

She needs to be destroyed.

I don’t give a shit if we’re off missions. I’d rather be grounded forever and face our issues head-on than try to keep pushing forward, stuck with another invader in our lives.

“She looks *rough*,” Finn says, still staring at the spot where she disappeared. He’s not wrong, but I can’t let myself catalog her bruises and scrapes or the hint of a scab in her hairline.

“She was spooked about Orion.” Hunter frowns. “Didn’t she know what she was walking into?”

“Craig,” Atlas barks, summoning the waste of a beta I can just barely tolerate since he’s at least a male. My stomach twists at his dog-eyed expression, the way he yearns for Atlas. The same way he looks at *me* when I’m forced to acknowledge him.

Alpha chaser.

“You spoke to her yesterday. What did she say?” Atlas asks.

“She disrespected me, Alpha.” The whine in Craig’s voice is the height of cringe. “And then she ran off before I could explain. But there’s no way she doesn’t know everything about you. It’s all online. You have *fan sites*,” he says in awe.

No doubt, Craig is a founding member.

I pull out my phone and scramble the drones, setting them to search the property, but they come up empty.

She can’t have gone *that* far.

“I’ll report when I find her.” I leave my brothers and Craig in the gazebo, desperate to escape the air the omega stained.

Thank the gods she doesn’t give off pheromones, but I can still scent the chlorine embedded in her skin.

I retreat to my second-floor office. It’s always been crowded with files and gear, but since I took over our team’s tech from Orion, the monitors have tripled. I’m glad to sink into my leather chair, surrounded by the faded scents of my packmates and the calming whir of electrical fans.

I check the house cams first.

Odds are, she’s already climbing into one of our beds.

But the rooms are empty of anyone except Orion, who’s busy pacing a landing strip in his bedroom carpet.

Orion’s fraying. I’d comfort him, only then he’d know that I am too.

She’s not in the kitchen or anywhere upstairs.

The basement’s just as empty.

A ragged duffel sitting in the grass is the only sign that Lilah was ever here.

I pull the drone feeds up on the big screen.

I have them zig-zagging our acreage when one of the perimeter alarms starts to sing.

“There you are.” I flick to the cam view and catch a glimpse of a girl sprinting like she’s being chased by monsters. Every few steps, she glances back, then speeds up, cutting a wild trail through the forest.

She’s as eerie as her speed.

The girl looks like a warmed-up skeleton. She shouldn’t be able to cover so much ground so fast. Maybe she’s trying to look pitiful. Trying to earn sympathy.

She won’t get any from me.

I pin a drone to her, silently following her desperate run. She’s well off our property by the time she hits the lakeshore.

Lilah barely stops.

She whips off her sweats and sneakers, and already wearing a one-piece bathing suit for some inconceivable reason, dives straight into the water.

She doesn’t come up.

I grip my chair arms, scanning the screen.

Still, she doesn't come up.

Thirty seconds later and fifty feet farther than I was expecting, her tangled brown hair finally surfaces. She freestyles toward the island at the center of the lake.

I've made a point of avoiding omegas, but after a lifetime of their simpering, their fake smiles, lies, and manipulations, I know exactly how they are. Omegas want attention and love. They want whatever they want, whatever calms their hormones and satisfies their insane instincts.

Lilah is no different. So I don't understand why she's running away.

The only possible answer is, she already has a pack. Maybe she's meeting them on the island with plans to flee.

I can't think of a better ending to this bullshit.

"Atlas." I ring him on the com. "You'll want to see this."

I'm expecting his dominance to roll through the room. Instead, I'm wrapped in cider sweetness as Orion slips inside, moving to my shoulder. "What's happening?"

"She's running."

"Away?" He sounds so hopeful.

"Not sure." I move the drone feed over to the big-screen TV, zooming in, but making the image bigger doesn't make it any more logical.

Orion leans in close, his shoulder bumping mine. His apple scent has a sharp, needy undertone that would signal a better alpha to pull him in for a hug. It's all I can do to stay still, allowing the contact to continue.

I can feel how it relaxes him, easing his nerves and tension.

But the touch does the opposite to me. I fight the urge to cringe and tear away.

Orion is my omega. My friend and pack brother since he stumbled into our lives at seven.

He's safe.

He would never use me like the others. I can let him touch me. I can give him this little piece of comfort.

I can.

I focus on the screen until Atlas arrives in a cloud of leather and agitation. Even then, his presence settles me, the hit of the pack leader's dominance a reassurance so deep it soothes my nervous system, slowing my breathing. Orion melts, drifting toward him and breaking contact, finally allowing me to fully calm.

"What's she doing?" Atlas asks, setting a hand on Orion's shoulder.

"She *was* running away. Now she's swimming away." I wave to the screen, helpless to explain the girl's behavior.

"Isn't that water glacial?" Orion asks.

It's fed by mountain streams and it's probably frigid.

But it's not my concern. "Let her escape if she wants to escape. It'll be the dads' problem."

"Agreed." Atlas nods. "But keep a drone on her. We don't need her killing herself on our watch."

"Is she pretty?" Orion squints at the screen.

Pretty. I scoff. "She's a mess."

Bruised and too thin. Ragged with dark circles. The glossy brown hair I remember tangles around her face, hiding the stars in her eyes.

"Ignore her." Atlas grunts. "I need to check in with HQ on the Redfangs. Keep me posted on the situation." He squeezes Orion's shoulder, then disappears.

Huffing out a sigh, Orion drops into the second office chair.

"Can I stay?" he asks with a frailty that shreds my resistance to having another body in my space.

An omega body, no less.

"You can stay. It's your gear." I reach over to squeeze his knee, feeling instantly guilty over the way he arches into my hand, craving his alpha's

touch.

I quickly pull back.

He might wear my bite, but outside his heat and its blissfully numbing insanity, I can't be the one to give Orion the love he needs.

We stare at the screen, warily watching the girl who can fuck us over like no other.

She hits the island and crawls out of the water only to sprint across the narrow strip of land, then dive back into the lake, disappearing for another heart-stopping length of time.

What the hell is the OCC training their omegas?

Pearl diving?

When she finally bobs to the surface, she cuts through the water without a rest.

She doesn't stop until she hits the opposite shore.

Lilah wobbles, taking a few rubber-legged steps before she catches her balance and starts running again. Only now she's barefoot in a swimsuit.

The drone keeps following, and with every step, as she penetrates deeper into the endless woods, it becomes clearer and clearer that the girl has no plot. There's no rendezvous with her lovers. No clandestine meetup or dark web information trade.

She's just running.

Maybe running for her life.

I keep staring at the screen, needing to see where this ends, if it does.

Or does she run forever?

Before I have an answer, the drone flashes a low-battery alert and sets an automatic course for home.

She outran the drone.

"What the hell is she doing?" Orion scowls, looking as torn as I feel, stretched between soul-deep hatred and the helpless worry of watching my first doomed love destroy herself.

“I don’t know.” I keep staring, mesmerized by the image of her slight figure sprinting as the drone retreats, her body growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

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ELEVEN

LILAH

I RUN and run and run.

I run until I literally can't anymore, and my body finally gives out. I land in soft grass.

Better that than a pricker bush, because I have no control over where I fall. I manage to throw my hands out, stopping myself from face planting, but that's it.

I lie like a stepped-on slug, panting and gasping.

After a while, I realize it's not my vision that's dark.

It's twilight.

And I'm wearing nothing but a bathing suit, surrounded by trees in a strange wilderness with no idea how to get back to the house where the demons live.

Stupid.

It's not like I have a phone or anyone to call for help. I doubt Evgenia even packed my cracked tablet—those are OCC-issue. My pack should be in charge of outfitting me now, but we all know they're not going to give me shit.

They don't want me.

Which shouldn't hurt, because I also don't want them, but no one ever said omega instincts make sense.

I manage the energy to sniff my pits.

Thank all the holies, all I smell is sweat. No pheromones. For now.

But my reaction to the Wyvern pack isn't normal.

I've never sought out alphas, but when I bump into them, my first reaction is repulsion. Second, comes the fear.

Until the Wyvern pack. Their pheromones are catnip and cocaine.

Addictive.

Irresistible.

Terrifying.

I wish the OCC had given me a shittier education, but for all its bullshit, the classes do explain everything about omegadom from top to bottoming.

I know what this means.

A scent match.

Destiny. Fate. My meant-to-be mates.

Omegas have an extra fail-safe when it comes to finding our matches. We don't need to be awakened to recognize their scents.

To them, my scent is nothing.

To me, theirs is everything I can never have.

I refuse to let them recognize me, to see me any deeper than they already have when it felt like they were staring into my soul.

If they figure out what I am, I'll be trapped with a pack that would rather see me dead than in their beds.

I refuse to be bound, let alone become a home-wrecker. After years of bullshit omega brawls, the last thing I'll ever do is steal another omega's mate. If anyone had bothered to mention—oh, by the way, we're placing you in a pack that *already has a mated omega*—I never would've signed that offer.

Never *ever*.

I would've gone into rotation or made my escape, but I never would've signed.

Orion must be going insane with jealousy.

I know I would be if some bitch strutted into my nest, trying to steal a tasty piece of man steak like Atlas and—

No. Nope. Not going down that insane rabbit hole.

It's good enough that they're willing to let me stay in their basement. Honestly, maybe I am perfect for this pack. If they need an omega who's expert at going unseen, there's no better ghost.

I just can't haunt them too long when they smell like a goddamn buffet so tempting I want to load my plate with every flavor and lick them clean.

First, I have to drag my stupid ass out of these woods.

I wasn't so spaced out on the drive that I didn't keep an eye on the front console. The dash map showed the lake, which is why I beelined there.

Running makes me feel better.

Swimming makes me feel best.

Since I swam straight across the lake, there should be a road somewhere to my right.

It takes a few more minutes to gather enough energy to stand, but the darkening sky kicks my ass into gear. I wobble upright and wince. My feet are wrecked, full-on bloody and stinging now that I can feel anything but numb.

I shiver like a North Pole elf who forgot her parka.

It's not that cold, but who's the genius prancing around in a damp bathing suit?

Fear gives me a second wind. I cannot get stuck out here all night.

Navigating as best I can, I leave the thickest part of the trees, heading toward what I hope is civilization.

The moon is bright enough to light my path.

After hiking long enough to leave my feet screaming, I hear the hum of cars zooming over asphalt. It's only when I pop out in a drainage ditch, climbing up toward the road, that I realize the flaw in my plan.

Hitchhiking is a thing that people do.

But not omegas, even scentless, unawakened ones.

I can't trust strange alphas.

If the driver's a beta it's probably fine, but the problem is, I don't trust *anyone*.

I'd rather curl up in this ditch than ask for help from yet another person who wants to use me, hurt me, or straight-up sell me off.

Again.

I promise myself I'll look up how to set up a lean-to and an organic farm, so the next time I'm lost in the woods, I can just stay fucking lost and solve all my problems.

Tonight, I'm too cold and hungry to sleep in a ditch, no matter the risk.

I climb up and stand on the shoulder, hugging my waist, shivering, and waiting for a car to pass. We must be farther out in the boonies than I realized because it's a few minutes before headlights appear.

I stick out my thumb like the movies. The car flies by.

I start walking toward Wyvern McManor. If I have to, I can trudge all the way back, but my feet seriously ache. Trail running barefoot wasn't my brightest idea.

I wasn't even thinking. I was fleeing.

The second car honks as it zooms past, and I resign myself to a long, woozy walk. I just hope I can find the driveway.

It's a while before the third set of headlights approaches, and a long line of bloody footprints stamps the ground behind me. I half-heartedly wave, not really expecting them to stop.

The pickup flies by.

As expected.

Until the brakes *skrrrrrr*.

The truck kicks into reverse and stops beside me. When the driver lowers his window, my heart drops to the pavement with a wet plop.

Hunter.

He smells like smoke and sweet liquor. I brace for my body's betrayal, expecting my perfume to pop out and say hello, but thank goddess, I'm too exhausted for omega shenanigans.

Hunter's jacked shoulders block my view of the passenger seat and pretty much everything else in the world because right now there's only *him*, with his big brown eyes and sexy scent that has me torn between vaulting through the window and tucking and rolling to the bottom of the ditch.

"What are you doing out here, little omega?" His thick eyebrows lift as he scans me from my bare, bloody feet to the suddenly rock-hard nipples poking through the fabric of my swimsuit.

Traitors.

"Move," a muffled voice says, and then Hunter's shoved out of the way. Finn leans over the steering wheel, craning toward me. With dark red hair and sparkling green eyes, he licks his lips, pure mischief. "You need a ride?"

"Hop in." Hunter nods to the backseat.

No way am I squeezing into the cab. I give it thirty seconds before I'm dry humping both of them.

I hobble around and climb the bumper, hauling myself into the truck bed. I crawl forward, then collapse. It feels *so good* taking the pressure off my feet.

Finn slides open the window in the back of the cab. "Scared of us, Omega?" His grin is all teeth. Maybe I'd be scared, but I taste his scent on the air.

He smells like blood oranges and sweet cream with a hint of smoky gunpowder. I gasp, and the taste coats my tongue, crawling down my throat like Finn's already inside me.

Holy fuck, I'm weak for these guys.

It takes a second before I can do words again.

All the while, Finn watches, eyes glittering like he's seriously enjoying himself.

"Glad you're having fun."

"You have no idea." He shuts the window, and I sag, free of the overpowering scent of him as Hunter guns the truck.

I lie back, lulled by the wind and the rocking bed.

I'm not aware of anything else until the *thunk* of the hatch going down. Blinking, I find a red-headed demon hovering over me.

"What are you doing?" Finn tilts his head like a curious puppy.

"Resting?" I blink up at him, confused, trying to hold my breath. I start to sit, but the world spins, and my stomach jumps on this opportunity to rumble like an alien creature.

"Here." Finn offers me a hand, pulling me up surprisingly gently. His touch is warm and satisfying as hot soup on a cold day. The good chicken noodle kind that fills up your soul.

Upright, I realize we're nowhere near the house. Tall buildings surround a crowded parking lot. I smell frying oil and cigarettes.

"Are you sending me back to the OCC?" It sounds like an amazing idea at this point. At least there, I can be anonymous. With the Wyverns, I'm under an electron microscope.

"Nah. Just brought you along for the night. You want to come out with us?" Hunter leans against the truck bed in a long-sleeved shirt that clings to his cut chest, giving only the sneakiest peek of the ink winding the dark tan skin at his wrists and neck.

"I'll wait here." I bite my lower lip to keep myself from licking it in front of him.

"Finn. Go find her some clothes." Hunter lets out a breath. "Not really a request. We're not leaving you alone in our truck."

"Why not?" It's not like they care what happens to me.

They don’t want me.

“Knew she’d be fun.” Finn laughs as he slides down to the ground. He disappears, leaving me alone with Hunter, who leans over the edge of the truck bed, watching with hawk eyes. His dark brown hair is cut short on the sides, but the wind teases the longer part on top, making me itch to push it away from his face the longer he keeps looking.

Too intense.

I can’t hide, so I slink until my back hits the cab, curling my knees to my chest, sitting on my hands, and tucking my feet under me so he can’t see the blood.

My stomach rumbles again, cutting the silence like an earthquake.

Hunter curses. “You haven’t eaten since this morning?”

I haven’t eaten in *days*. “I’ll be fine.”

“We’re not trying to starve you.”

I shrug. There’s never been a day I could eat as much as I want whenever I want. The OCC’s meal plans are expensive. I opted into the lowest tier as soon as I was old enough to realize how much I already owed. Then I was busy ducking omegas who wanted to jump me, skipping the dining hall, skipping meals. The trainers reduced my rations for any little thing from talking back to fighting back when I was cornered. Eventually, I realized hunger was a necessary evil if I wanted to drag out my awakening.

The longer Hunter watches, the tighter I curl into myself.

He’s not just watching me. I feel like he can see my whole dark history and all my secrets.

I wilt under his gaze.

Waaaaay too intense.

Finally, Finn appears, dropping a rumpled wad of cloth into the truck bed.

I chew my lip. I don’t really have to go, right?

“Change,” Hunter orders. There’s no bark, but his deep, husky voice is its own command.

I dig into the bundle.

It’s a skimpy black dress with lace cutouts. The fabric smells like powder detergent or a neutral beta scent, but I catch a whiff of oranges where Finn’s pheromones cling.

I hate myself for wanting to bury my nose in it.

I slip the dress over my swimsuit, then start to figure out how to slide on the matching thigh-high leggings.

“Shit.” Finn clambers into the truck bed, grabbing my ankle. “What happened to your feet?”

They don’t feel that bad, but when he gently turns my foot, even I wince. The bottom’s a sheet of blood, all embedded with dirt and pebbles. “I’ll clean them when we get back.”

“You’ll clean them *now*,” Hunter growls. “Grab her.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Finn scoops me up.

All I can do is yelp before I’m ass-up over his shoulder, my face pressed into his lower back. He slides down from the truck bed, gripping me firmly behind the knees.

Finn’s nose bumps my thigh and I *feel* him sniff me.

A shiver rolls through my body, lighting me up in the most dangerous way. “Put me down!”

“No chance, Babydoll.” Finn pats my calf.

Hunter grabs something from the cab, then locks the truck behind us, and I don’t bother struggling. I need to save my energy.

I can’t see anything but Finn’s tight ass in his jeans.

All I can do is hang, pressed against his heat, trying not to squirm or pant over the lickable strip of lower back muscles revealed when my weight tugs up his shirt. It’s torture sucking in the scent of him, and all I can do is pray I’m too tapped out to perfume.

Finn carries me through a door, and I'm hit with a wall of humidity, noise, and hundreds of foreign scents that make me go rigid.

"Almost there." Finn rubs the back of my leg, pressing it tight to his chest. His touch shouldn't be comforting, but we've established that I'm broken.

"Put her here," Hunter says.

There's a scraping sound before Finn plops me down into a bar chair.

I blink. Finn steals the tall chair next to me and waves for the bartender while Hunter drapes a zip-up hoodie over my shoulders.

His scent *soaks* the fabric. Honey and smoke and something sharper. I grab the stool to keep myself from dragging the sleeves to my nose.

"What can I do for you tonight, alphas?" A pretty blonde bats her lashes from behind the bar.

"Loaded cheese fries, a plate of wings, and your first aid kit." Hunter doesn't even look at the girl, busy zipping the hoodie up to my chin.

I can't move.

I don't know if I want to flip up the hood and snuggle into the shirt or rip it off and bolt. Or just give in to the inevitable and jump Hunter so we can skip to the part where the pack tosses me away.

"And two shots of mezcal," Finn adds, swiveling his chair until his knees pin mine in place.

I'm trapped.

Trapped, but it could be worse.

It's warm here, they're being nice, and I heard something about cheese fries.

I can stick this out. All I have to do is keep my perfume tucked in and pretend my inner omega isn't already bent over and begging for them.

"Here." The blonde slides a white box across the bar. "I'll be right back with the drinks and food."

Hunter pushes Finn out of the way and kneels between my knees.

My body short-circuits.

Some unspeakable part of me wants to spread my legs wide and see what happens. My self-protective instinct wins. I recoil, hugging my knees tight to my chest.

“Easy,” Hunter says, softly touching my ankle. “You need these taken care of.”

“You don’t have to—”

“But I’m going to.” Hunter draws down my foot, and I feel myself easing under his hands. “Relax.”

I do what he says, letting him take over.

Finn ignores the chaos of the sports bar from the flashing screens to the beautiful betas strutting past in clouds of manufactured pheromone perfume that makes me wrinkle my nose. Bass thumps, women laugh, and alphas growl. Maybe it’s been too long since I’ve eaten, or maybe I finally pushed myself too hard, but everything’s swimmy and unreal.

Finn swivels back and forth in his chair, floating above the chaos while Hunter cleans my cuts, and it feels like the three of us are in our own bubble.

“It’ll hurt,” Hunter warns before dabbing on the disinfectant.

I clench my jaw and don’t let out a peep. I don’t need him thinking I’m any weaker, even though it stings like I’m wearing beehives for slippers.

“Shit. You ran on these?” He scrubs at the dirt, making my muscles clench in protest. “Sorry. There’s gravel we need to get out.”

“I lost my sneakers.” I’ll have to backtrack my steps tomorrow. My only other shoes are a pair of shower sandals held together by duct tape and prayer. “You don’t have to—”

“But I am,” Hunter insists.

By the time he’s dabbing on antibacterial ointment, making me squirm with every gentle touch, the bartender reappears, sliding over a basket of

steaming fries and two tiny glasses of murky gold liquor. “Wings’ll be right up.”

“Here.” Finn holds out a fry slathered in cheese and bacon and who knows what else, but it looks *outrageous*. “Try.” He lifts it to my lips.

Lord help me, I take the bite.

Cheese and potato explode on my tongue, scalding hot, but too fucking delicious to do anything but moan. I’ve never tasted food this *good*.

“Babydoll.” Finn’s voice is so fucking husky it could pull a sled. “I’ll feed you all night if you keep making those sounds.”

I blush.

I need to stop, but Finn dips a second fry in ranch sauce, and I’m only flesh and blood. I open for him.

He feeds me the fry, fingers lingering on my lips.

When I lick the sauce, my tongue catches a sweet taste of oranges.

I moan, covering my mouth.

So good.

Finn keeps feeding me with a single-minded determination I can’t resist while Hunter wraps my arches in gauze.

One alpha at my feet, another hand-feeding me. I’m pretty sure I should be freaking out, but melty cheddar is some kind of drug. All I want to do is sit and be pampered.

“This next.” Finn presses the shot glass into my fingers.

“What is it?” I sniff the liquor. It smells like liquid smoke, but sweeter.

“Hunter in a glass. He’ll warm you up and make you forget those feet.”

“Finn,” Hunter rumbles a warning. “You can’t make her drink mezcal.”

“What? I’m not making her. Am I making you?”

“No.” He really isn’t. Besides, alcohol is a downer, great for suppressing my pheromones. I’ve never tasted any except for a few sips of champagne at OCC events I snuck into. I liked the little bubbles.

“Cheers.” Finn clinks his glass to mine.

“Cheers?” I dump the shot into my mouth, not waiting to see if he does the same.

It burns.

I clap a hand over my face, almost spluttering, swallowing down the liquid smoke. It’s rich and deep and sweet.

Just like the man between my legs.

“How do you like taking Hunter between those lips?” Finn smirks.

“Delicious,” I answer, still savoring the smoke on my tongue. Then I realize what he said. “I mean. No. Not… That’s not…”

“Ignore Finn. Everyone does.” Hunter stands, closing up the kit.

I wiggle my bandaged toes. Thanks to his magic touch or maybe the liquor burning a hole in my stomach, I feel weirdly comfy and light. “Thank you.”

“Eat more.” Finn holds up another bite, this time a chicken wing I didn’t notice being delivered.

I reach for it. “I can—”

“No way.” He snatches the wing away. “Let me.”

I’m too hungry to argue. He wants to play games, I can play. I need them all to see me as sweet and harmless. I need them to tolerate having me around for as long as it takes to plan my escape.

All the better if they like me. Then we’ll have no drama, and I’ll just hide in their basement until I can disappear.

I nibble the wing and my eyes roll back at the taste of sweet barbecue sauce.

I’ve had worse days.

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TWELVE

FINN

OUR LOANER OMEGA makes the sexiest sounds. I keep leaning into her, trying to catch a sniff, but all she smells like is Hunter's smoke.

She might not be awakened, but when she moans, my cock fucking is. He perks up every time she licks those rosebud lips.

Lilah.

She gives me a high I haven't felt since I raced my first Ducati or discovered wingsuits. Feeding her, sneaking brushes at her mouth, I can't even sense the void.

She's starlight, soft and bright.

Plus Hunter's fucking face.

He never says shit, but I can read the asshole's inner workings. *Stop touching her, Finn. Don't get so close. She's not ours.*

I know all this.

But I said from moment one that I wanted to play with her, and that's what I'm going to fucking do.

If she'd showed up flirting, shaking her tail and trying to pry us away from Orion, then I would've just fucked with her.

Lilah's innocent.

Which—*who knew*—is even more fun.

She’s hesitant, almost afraid, but why do I love it when she leans into my touch? When she relaxes, accepting the food from my hand with those sweet, sparkling eyes.

“Have another shot.” I push her the glass I didn’t down. I’m still banned from drinking. The pack claims I start too many fights.

Like I won’t start shit sober?

Lilah knocks back the mezcal with an adorable shudder, wrinkling her nose and everything.

“Slow down.” Hunter takes away the empty glass, shooting me the *back off* glare.

So much fun.

I offer her another wing, but she finally shakes her head. “Too full.”

“Want to dance it off?” Hunter and I were supposed to be cruising for a beta to share, but I’m not letting go of Lilah for some quick bathroom fuck.

“Dance?” Her eyes light like glittering grey stars. “Where?”

“Upstairs. Come on.” I grab her hand, but Hunter grabs my wrist.

“Feet,” he says like a fucking mama duck.

He’s so much more fun when he’s playing with me instead of against me. Tonight, I’m team Lilah.

I scoop her into a princess hold and carry her to the coatroom while Hunter mutters and settles our tab.

“Hey,” I call to the coatroom beta. “You have any lost shoes in a size...”

“Five?” Lilah asks hopefully.

“Just a sec.” She disappears under the counter, then quickly reappears with a tiny pair of silver heels. “Princess shoes for the princess.”

Lilah makes an adorable snort, eyeing the heels so hard it deepens the wrinkles in her nose.

“Let me.” I set her on the counter and step between her legs.

Her pupils dilate and her pulse speeds up. Any second, she’ll wrap her arms around my neck and her thighs around my waist, pressing her tight

little body all up against mine…

Only she doesn't.

Weird.

The girl's not awakened, but she's also not dead.

Women can't love me because there's nothing in my burned-out soul worth caring about, but I mastered the bad boy asshole thing by fifteen.

They line up to fuck.

I ease Lilah's bandaged foot into the shoe and carefully tighten the buckles. Her toes are adorable. Like little round pearls. I tweak the smallest one.

"Finn!" she gasps my name.

Fuuuuck, that's good.

I want to carry her everywhere, but I set her down to let her test the shoe situation. "Okay?"

"Good." She shifts her weight back and forth. "There's a club?"

"This way." I tug her away before Hunter can follow.

Then I carry her upstairs. I'm no gentleman. I just want to grab her hips and feel her body pressed against mine. Lilah's so goddamned small. I can't help leaning in to smell her hair.

All I get is lake water and sweat. I know that's not right.

There should be more. Maybe after she awakens?

For the first time, it's something to look forward to.

The upstairs bouncer leaps the fuck out of my way without carding. Smart man. Lilah doesn't notice. Now she's the one tugging me toward the writhing dancefloor.

She dives straight into the chaos.

My kind of girl.

But when she starts to move, I lose words.

She's boneless. She moves like the beat is in her blood, like she was born to feel herself. Sexy as fuck, even swimming in Hunter's too-big

hoodie. The hem of her borrowed dress creeps higher and higher, baring the kind of pale, silky thighs you need to spend way more than one night between.

I watch her without blinking, and I'm not the only alpha tracking this sweet piece of prey.

Darkness leeches out my vision.

When an asshole steps too close, like he deserves to touch her skin, breathe her air, I let my dominance bleed. He flinches so hard he sloshes his beer when he flees.

Every single alpha who can't meet my gaze fucks right off, leaving Lilah alone to shake and wind.

I'm so fucking hard for her.

When the beat slows, turning raunchier, I slip behind her.

She sinks against me, so sweet, so submissively showing me the long, smooth column of her neck.

We move together, her ass grinding against me, her arms slipping down my thighs. I'm turned on as fuck, so I shouldn't give a shit that her dance has nothing to do with me.

I never give a shit about anything.

But I need Lilah's attention.

I grip her soft throat and tilt her chin back with my thumb. When her head bumps my chest, and she stares up at me, seeing *only me*, Lilah wears a smile like moonbeams. My heart gives the one full-on thump it usually saves for jumping off bridges.

Fucking weird.

"Can we dance up there?" Lilah nods toward the cage, never once fighting my grip on her throat.

"Fuck yeah we can." A rumble rocks my chest, and I tug her into my arms, steering her to the cages and protecting her from the eyes and crowds.

Everywhere Lilah's skin touches mine is electric, alive and bright instead of the dull, nothing numbness that drives me to drink and fuck and stir shit up.

I don't want to let her go.

Keeping her close, I cut to the front. The club girl running the line spots Lilah's hoodie and scowls. "You can't—"

"We can." I dead-eye her.

She yelps, scrambling back and opening the cage door wide. "My mistake."

Fucking right.

We climb in alone, and I shouldn't be able to hear anything over the pounding music, but I catch Lilah's breathy gasp when the cage lifts. Once we're up, dangling from the ceiling just high enough to make you feel alive, she laughs, clear and bright.

Gripping the bars like it's not her first time in a cage, Lilah drops low, arching her back and flashing that sweetly curved ass.

I want her holding onto me instead of those bars, but she doesn't even try to move closer, just feeling the music, throwing herself into the beat like she's begging for salvation, like the beat's the only light in her darkness

I fucking feel you, girl.

I move behind her, caging her in, and Lilah rolls with it, rubbing up on me so good as she shakes her ass.

The bass drowns out my satisfied purr.

Where the fuck did that come from?

The sound steals my attention long enough that I spot Hunter. He's waving off beta bitches, pacing back and forth, looking everywhere for us.

Kinda makes me cackle. I grind on my babydoll until his gaze snaps up.

What a sweet, sweet scowl.

Hunter points down and mouths something.

I cup my ear. *Can't hear you, motherfucker!*

We dance a few more songs, and I'm *alive*, heart pumping, adrenaline roaring in my veins, heat and color, and *everything* until I realize Lilah isn't moving.

She grips the bars, shaking.

"Babydoll?" I pry her hands away from the metal.

"Tired," she murmurs, head lolling against my chest. My heartbeat levels off and I let out a breath. I was worried—

Holy fuck.

I was *worried?*

Me?

I haven't worried about shit since I notched my first kill at seven years old. I wasn't *supposed* to start assassination work that young, but what are you gonna do when you get kidnapped and tortured?

It was kill or be killed.

I won, and nothing seems important since.

Only a few things make me feel alive.

Bikes. Stunts. Saunas.

Killing. Clubbing. Fucking.

And Lilah motherfucking Darling.

I wave to lower our cage. As soon as the door opens, Hunter tears Lilah from my arms. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. Maybe she drank too much?" Are two shots too much? She is *super* tiny.

"Let's get her home."

I follow him to the truck.

He settles her into the back seat but yanks my collar when I start to climb in with her. "You stay."

"Why? I want to sit with her." She's adorable, curling into herself, hugging Hunter's hoodie tight. Lilah's all the fun of vodka shots and drag racing without the hangover and jail time.

“*That’s* why. Since when do you get so attached so fast?”

“Since Lilah. Don’t you feel it?”

“What? The guilt?”

“No.” Guilt isn’t even a thing. “She’s special.”

“Don’t say that shit in front of Orion.”

“Fine, but she’s still special. He’ll see.” And the way Hunter keeps glancing at her through his rearview, he’s only fucking fooling himself.

Why not have fun with our new pet?

“Don’t get obsessed,” Hunter warns. “She’s temporary.”

Maybe. But she’s not vanishing.

When Lilah ends up in rotation, I’ll be first in fucking line for her heat. “It’s not like Orion doesn’t let us play.”

“With *betas*,” Hunter insists. “Not with omegas. And not the omega he thinks is replacing him.”

“No one’s replacing Orion.” He’s our boy and our sunshine. The whole mate, crazy heat sex thing is a fringe benefit.

When we finally pull up at the house, Atlas waits on the front porch.

I grab Lilah before Hunter can steal her again. The way she nuzzles me like a soft baby kitten keeps me from slipping into the void.

“You took her out?” Atlas growls.

“Shh.” I cup my babydoll’s ear. “You’ll wake her.”

“So fucking help me, Finn.” Atlas glances up at the sky.

Let him be a cranky shit while I take care of the pretty omega.

“We didn’t take her out. We found her on the roadside wearing next to nothing with bloody feet. She hadn’t even eaten. Didn’t Craig have the basement stocked for her?”

“She hasn’t been in the house,” Atlas says. “Just put her downstairs.”

Pack leader’s orders, I climb the front steps.

“No,” Lilah whines, all pitiful, clutching my shirt. “Back door.”

“I’d love to take your back d—”

“Dude!” Hunter elbows me in the gut.

“Fine, fine.” I stomp into the grass, taking her around back where her sad duffel bag sits alone in the dew.

I liked the idea of banishing her when she was supposed to be some slutty viper spy, but now the backyard seems too dark. The stairs are too steep if she falls. There’s not even a lock.

It’s not safe.

I climb down and find the light switch.

The downstairs is more bunker than basement, and it’s shabbier than I remember. The sheets on the nest bed are dingy grey, though fuck if I remember the last time I even looked at a sheet.

When I set Lilah down, she makes a breathy noise against my throat that gives me a 3D vision of her teeth raking my Adam’s apple. Claiming me.

My cock stands to attention, and I catch a sweet whiff of something impossible.

Caramel?

I sniff her scalp, coming up with nothing but dust and basement mold.

I unbuckle her shoes and tuck a thin blanket over her shoulders, stalling like I’m nursing the bottom of a glass.

The second I leave, I’ll crash from the temporary high Lilah injected into my veins.

I always come back down.

Hunter sets her bag at the foot of the bed, then tugs me away. “Enough.”

“I want to kiss her good night.” I’m praying a taste of her lips is enough to keep away the darkness.

“She’s not a toy.”

Isn’t she though?

I let Hunter drag me into the gym, and reality snaps back like a rubber fucking band.

The empty, yawning nothing.

I can feel the smile bleeding off my face. The color and electricity. All gone.

“Spar or sauna?” Hunter hauls me onto the mats, knowing how close I am to the edge.

Anyone else I’d kill.

The bond humming between us is the only thing that reminds me I’m not already dead.

Though fuck knows, I will be soon.

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THIRTEEN

LILAH

I WAKE up aching and hating myself in a strange bed and a stranger house. Everything that's happened since the gazebo feels like it happened to some other girl.

But yesterday's mistakes are all mine.

It's a toss-up what hurts more. My head, my feet, or my crushed fucking pride.

What was I thinking, dancing with Finn? Letting him stroke my throat like I'm wearing his collar?

Am I the kind of girl who rolls over and begs just because a sexy as fuck alpha smiles and feeds her cheese fries?

Damnit.

I'm totally that girl.

But the fries were good and he was better.

Holy shit could Finn dance.

The way he ground against me, feeling the music. His hard body and his warm hands. Blood orange so sweet in my nose. I'm not sure if I was drunk off him or my first taste of liquor.

And Hunter. Gruff but gentle Hunter, tending my feet and protecting me like the mate he'll never be to me.

I’m still huddled in his hoodie, drowning in smoky mezcal that makes my mouth water and my heart feel too big for my rib cage.

I get that the Wyverns are going to be tempting—my body thinks we’re meant-to-be.

Doesn’t matter.

They can love me, they can hate me. I’m not staying, and I need to keep my ass on the path that gets me out of this contract with my heart, dreams, and limbs uncrushed.

I slide off the bed and test my weight. My feet ache, but I want to explore my new cage.

I creep around, exploring the bedroom. It’s low-ceilinged and *almost* what a nest should be. Windowless with dim lights that set me at ease and a huge bed that could fit my whole pack if I had one.

But the heavy bank vault door is just for show. It doesn’t lock.

My shoulders hunch. I can’t believe I slept here when any of them could’ve walked in and done whatever they wanted to me.

No lock means no privacy means no rest *ever again*.

I can’t relax here.

Creeping outside, I peek around the basement. The main room is teeny tiny, with a kitchenette, and so many doors it gives bus station vibes.

One open door leads to a teensy bathroom with a kiddie-sized shower, but it *does* lock, so this may be my new sleeping digs for as long as I’m stuck in McMansion hell.

Another door opens to a cleaning closet with shelves of supplies, including two barrels of chemical de-scenter big enough to hide a body.

It’s meant for use on surfaces and clothes because the shit burns your nose, let alone your skin, but it’s the only way to scrub off pheromones.

I don’t need the heavy-duty chemicals yet, but good to know they’re here.

If my perfume betrays me again, I’ll kill it with fire.

I find a spray bottle of the diluted formula and grab it, bringing it back to the kitchen, where the cabinets and mini-fridge are all empty except for an ancient box of baking soda.

Food can wait. I ate so much last night, there's time before I have to brave going upstairs to see my personal hell pack.

There are two more locked doors that I *should* leave alone, but I can't relax not knowing who could come in and out of my space. My inner omega is all about the territorial anxiety.

I luck out, finding a few old paperclips in the kitchenette's junk drawer, and quickly pick the locks.

The first door opens to a huge gym so soaked in Hunter's sweet smoke, I choke before I can whip it shut. The blast of air carries undertones of the other guys, but Hunter's thick scent rearranges my sinuses.

Note to self: no working out in Hunter's pheromone cloud.

The other locked door leads to the inside stairway. I close that one just as quickly, hating how many stairs and doors and ways there are to find me.

Definitely need to find a better hideout.

My omega instincts want me unpacking my duffel, tidying, and securing the nest, so I keep the bag zipped. I'm not moving in for real.

But I do need to backtrack to the lake and pick up the clothes that I dropped, because all I have are two spare sets, not counting the little black dress and silver heels that I'm going to burn.

I take a quick but necessary shower, needing to wash off all the scents of last night's club, but mostly Finn's orange-soaked touch.

After body wash and a towel that both reek of Hunter, I spritz myself all over with de-scenter.

Eyes closed, holding my breath, the shit *burns* at the same time it feels too good. Even if turns me half lobster, I just want to smell neutral so I can feel at least a little bit like myself.

Next, I have to figure out how the hell I'm escaping.

Thank the gods and goddesses, Evgenia packed my tablet.

Maybe the OCC just didn't want to reclaim the cracked-screen dinosaur. Either way, I'm grateful.

Now I have almost everything I need.

Only one problem. The Wi-Fi password.

I don't have data. I have a little cash saved in my secret accounts but no way of accessing or adding to the funds if I can't get online.

Like I said.

I can go a week without food.

I can go four minutes without oxygen.

But I cannot survive a single day without Wi-Fi.

I just have to be a good ghost and wait for the right time to sneak upstairs. I creep to the bottom of the stairway and press my ear to the door.

Nothing but silence.

Wood creaks somewhere else in the house, but I don't hear footsteps, music, or any other sign that anyone's home.

I chew my lip, hesitating.

I have to be brave. Make a break while I can, try to find their router, and pray that someone wrote down the password.

Clutching the half-busted tablet, I sneak through the door. My feet sting and my blood pumps. I move silently, hyper-aware of every scent and sound.

At the top of the steps, I press my ear to the door again.

Still nothing.

Breathing fast, I touch the doorknob.

A door slams in the house, and I snatch my fingers back like the knob's on fire.

Craig's voice carries in a sickening whine. "Yes, Alpha. I just got back. No. She's downstairs. No, I haven't. Yes, I will. Yes, Alpha. Can I come meet the pack? I'll—"

His voice cuts off, and he curses softly. Plastic rustles, and then a chair creaks, taking someone's weight.

Craig is number one on my not-safe-to-be-alone-with list, but if no one else is home, I need to take this chance.

Patting my hip to make sure my shiv is tucked in my waistband, I suck in a deep breath. *I can take care of myself.*

The basement stairway opens to a hall, and I spot kitchen tile in the archway just diagonal. Somewhere inside, a bag rustles, then there's a *crunch crunch crunch* and a gross, lip-smacking noise that's so ear-licking it could only be Craig.

I creep on tiptoe, taking shallow breaths. I don't catch any alpha scents, or omega, *thank goddess*.

Craig sits at the breakfast nook of a high-end kitchen, shoveling salt and vinegar chips into his mouth and fiddling with his phone.

Clutching my tablet tighter, I clear my throat.

He keeps munching and scrolling.

I wouldn't put him past him to ignore me on purpose, but he has that glazed out-of-body look of someone living inside the digital world. Like that one omega I saw so focused on editing her selfie, she didn't realize she was perfuming in the middle of a social until an alpha had his teeth halfway into her neck.

She was *pissed* he made her hit post before she added her skin-smoothing filter.

I have a feeling Craig's about to be equally excited.

"Uh—"

"Shit!" Craig jumps, bobbling his phone before fixing me with his beta stink eye. "What the hell are you doing sneaking around?"

I hold out my tablet like an alibi. "I just wanted to ask for the Wi-Fi password."

"Tough shit." He scowls with chip grease slicking his thin lips.

“It’s just a password.”

“Why do you even want it? So you can hack the cameras and steal data from the pack?”

Hack? I blink.

At least now I know there are cameras in the house. And now that I know, I can feel the eyes on me like poison ivy vines creeping up my back, choking and claustrophobic. “I need to check my email.”

“So use your phone.”

“I don’t have a phone.”

“Sure you don’t.” Craig flicks chip crumbs into the air. “Let me guess. You want the pack to buy you one? It’s never happening.”

“I just want Wi-Fi on my tablet,” I say like I’m explaining to a toddler who needs a four-hour nap and a long time out.

“No. You don’t need to bother getting comfortable.” Craig narrows his eyes until they’re sewer-rat beady. “Soon enough, you’ll be back where you belong.”

Too bad I don’t belong anywhere. Least of all, in this kitchen. Still, I hug my tablet.

If it were anything else, I’d give up, but I need a way to reach the outside world. Otherwise, I’ll be trapped forever with the pack that doesn’t want me and their asshole sidekick, Craig.

Betas should be easy to manipulate.

He’d be *cake* if I had a single pheromone or a slice of charm.

Too bad I’m not the omega he wants to impress. If anything, the pack will thank him for driving me away.

“Please?” I try to sound sweet while my fingers clench around the ghost of something stabbity.

“What are you going to do for me?” he asks.

Not stab you in the eye? That’s as much as I can promise.

“Never mind.” This is pointless, and even if I have to ask one of the alphas, I won’t beg a beta.

“Did I say you could go? Put away the groceries and don’t even think about stealing. I know everything that happens in this house.”

Craig saunters past me, smirking when I shrink away from him.

As if I’m afraid?

I just don’t want the stink of wet cardboard clinging to me.

This is why I hate betas.

They’re all smiles and pretty words when they’re sucking up to an alpha or a *real* omega.

Me? I see the ugly truth.

The kitchen tile is cool against my bandaged feet. Without Craig, the space is straight off someone’s vision board with huge glossy appliances and a floor-to-ceiling view of the gardens.

It would be gorgeous if not for the touches of frat boy.

The bag of salt and vinegar chips that Craig left to marinate adds to the rubble of open packages on the table and counters. Crumbs dust every surface, and dead moths pile under the fancy under-cabinet lighting.

I shudder.

Mess in your home is like nails on the chalkboard of an omega’s brain. It’s not even *my* home, and I have to take a few deep breaths to stop myself from hyperventilating.

Maybe it’s different for male omegas? There were never many at the OCC and they mostly kept the guys apart from the female side of campus.

We tend to react…explosively to each other. Full-on clawing, biting, hair-pulling embarrassment.

I should ignore Craig’s order and scamper back downstairs, but since he told me to put stuff away…

No one will mind if I clean a little. I’ll have nightmares of ants biting my ass if I don’t deal with this slobbery.

I toss the petrified remains of chips and snack cakes into the trash and quickly stash Craig's "groceries," which is code for chips, cookies, and instant noodles. When I put away the one almost fruit—a jug of orange juice—I gag when I open the fridge.

It's a graveyard of sauces and takeout containers that time forgot.

I jam in the juice and fall back against the door.

Nightmare city.

I'm starting to get curious about Orion. I guess an omega who can tolerate Craig is an omega who knows how to tolerate all kinds of shit.

For now, I put everything in the cupboards, remembering which ones have the food, just in case I need to sneak a meal of cheese puffs.

It's fine for me—I'm *trying* to screw with my hormones. Any other omega would shrivel up if all their meals came out of plastic bags.

I'm using wadded paper towels to herd moth corpses without touching them when I catch the sound of soft footfalls.

"Craig?" asks a male voice as silky and sweet as unicorn fur. "What did I tell you about—"

The footsteps die in the doorway.

I tense like a tarantula rears between my shoulder blades, fangs poised to strike.

I hold my breath.

I don't turn around.

Maybe he'll keep walking.

Maybe he'll pretend this never happened.

"You're not supposed to be here," he growls with rage so spiky, I jump.

A whiff of apple cider sneaks into my nose and bubbles into my bloodstream.

My mouth waters.

My knees wobble.

My body doesn't know what to do.

Do I lick him?

Do I grovel?

I tremble, aware on a cellular level that I'm the one in his territory. I'm the intruder. The *enemy*.

"I'm sorry." I turn slowly, opening my palms, dipping my head, and keeping my gaze dropped to the floor.

But speaking means breathing and I catch a face full of the sweetest omega scent I've ever tasted.

I've smelled hundreds of omegas. Hundreds of scents, no two even close to similar, and I've loathed *every. Single. One*.

If they smelled floral, they were too fake. If they smelled like baked goods, they were too thick and cloying and *ugh*.

This scent is…

Crisp apple cider with hints of autumn.

It's like snuggling under a blanket in an apple orchard, gazing up at the stars feeling comfy and cozy and so impossibly *safe*.

It's exactly where I want to be.

It's exactly what I *want*.

"Why are you upstairs?" his voice shakes. "Why are you *here*?"

I can't look at him. My throat muscles clench and unclench. "Craig told me to— I didn't mean—"

"Get out," he says roughly.

I lift my head just high enough to see his toes. He wears thick socks where he stands, totally blocking the doorway.

I shuffle to the side, hugging the wall of cabinets. I know I can't look at him. It'll break me to see the hate in his eyes. To see the man who smells like *that* staring at me like I'm scum.

Shuffle-stepping, I make my way around the kitchen, looking only at the tiles.

He steps back when I come too close. "I don't want to see you again."

“Okay,” I yelp, slithering away, needing to be anywhere but here.

“Wait.”

My joints lock like he just barked an alpha command, every inch of me alert for his next words.

“You’re bleeding,” he says softly.

If he told me to fuck off, I would.

If he told me to disappear, I’d be gone.

But if he tells me you’re bleeding in *that voice*, that silky, sexy voice, how am I supposed to keep looking away?

My gaze snaps to him.

Our eyes clang, and a chip falls from my heart with a crisp, metallic sound that makes my ears ring.

Angel blond curls with sapphire blue eyes and a collar of glittering silver mate bites.

All he needs is armor and a horse and he’d be a prince.

But Orion isn’t here for a rescue. He’s here for my execution.

“Get out.” His plush pink lips curl. “Out!”

I run, the back of my throat tasting like blood.

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FOURTEEN

ORION

I GRIP THE DOORFRAME, shaking. My nostrils flare, trying to pull in Lilah's scent, but she's long gone and there's nothing.

Nothing!

My crazy fucking hormones riot.

She's so tiny and beautiful, and I know without even one doubt that the guys are going to leave me for her.

I came downstairs to tell off Craig, who knows he's not supposed to creep around the house. But who do I find putting away the food?

A strange omega.

Lilah Darling.

I bit back the urge to jump her, strangle her, and throw her the fuck out of my territory.

Then she submitted.

She trembled, apologizing, offering me her neck, and the more she flinched, the more impossible it was to stay mad. Which pissed me off even more. Because that's exactly how she'll worm her way into my packmates' hearts.

That's how she'll replace me.

With big grey eyes that stare into your soul and bloody marks on the floor that trick you into thinking it would be a great idea to sweep her into

your arms and comfort her.

More than half of me wants to chase her. Maybe push her down the stairs. Smother the girl with a lead pillow before she steals every last person I love.

This is the third time I've met a female omega. The first was when I met my little cousin, Phaedra. A sweet, shy girl who gripped her mother's shirt and *everyone* instantly loved.

Even Atlas.

The second time was when Atlas took me to the OCC to officially register my omega status. I don't know her name, but the woman smelled sweet as buttercream frosting and wore a coy smile that drove alphas insane. Every male in the building would've rutted her in the lobby, right next to the fake fucking ferns.

While holding my hand, Atlas tracked her like a wolf stalking a fawn, nostrils flaring, pupils dilating.

Now there's a female just like that inside my *home*.

And fuck is she perfect.

I want to kill her at the same time I want to bring her a blanket and fresh bandages for her feet because *why the hell is she bleeding on my floor?*

I lean over one of the splotches where she soaked through her gauze, giving a tentative sniff. It's iron. Metallic. Not a hint of pheromone.

That lack is the only thing standing between me and losing my pack. As soon as she perfumes, I'm fucked.

I trudge upstairs to Jett's office. He's not home. None of them ever are, off dealing with the Redfang fallout they've barely told me about. Even when they're not on mission, they're busy at HQ, teaching classes and guiding the recruits.

I'm banned from the building.

Scorpio says it's not personal. An omega who can't control his perfume will only stir up the students and spark dominance battles.

So I’m stuck. Alone.

It leaves me too much time with my thoughts, and today, too much time with the security cams. I pull up the feed from a few minutes ago, skipping back until Lilah crouches in her room, timidly listening against the door.

I watch her creep, babying her feet, but moving so smoothly this can’t be her first time playing wraith. When she meets Craig, and the shithead goes after her, I should be cheering. Instead, I scowl at the screen.

“I just wanted to ask for the Wi-Fi password,” she says softly.

Craig thinks the girl is a hacker?

Even *I’m* not that insane.

Besides, why would Lilah need to hack our files?

She’s a female omega. All she has to do is *ask*. The guys will give, tell, or steal her any little thing she wants.

Maybe not yet, but she’s been here one night, and she already has Finn mesmerized. Maybe Hunter, too.

How long until Atlas caves? And Jett? He looks at her like he’s seeing a ghost.

Fucking *Craig*.

He orders the girl to do chores like he’s a bitten-in member of the pack, which he’s not and will never be unless I’m dead and the guys are insane. Lilah does his job better than him, quickly putting away the food and cleaning the filth.

I’d do it myself, except I hate being downstairs with Craig stalking around, shooting me moon eyes and panting after my alphas. It was even worse when we hired a housekeeper. I could smell the woman for *weeks*. It made me extra twitchy, expecting the lady to pop around a corner every second.

The video keeps playing, and I watch myself meet Lilah.

I look wrecked.

She looks terrified, absolutely cowering from me.

Which makes me guilty.

Which makes me mad.

And now I'm sweating, itchy under my collar, and craving a hug from alphas who won't have thought of me in hours.

Ripping into her, I look like a genuine crazy person.

She runs to the basement, then outside, escaping through the gardens. Frowning, I switch to the live cam feeds until I find her again. Jett must've programed the drones to follow any motion outside because one's already locked on to her, following her sprint toward the lake.

When Lilah reaches the shore, she strips down and dives into the frigid water. She acts like she's training for the Olympics.

With her out of the house and totally off the property, the worst of my territorial insanity fades. I can breathe without inhaling angry sparks and finally see reality instead of crazed omega bullshit.

Lilah swims like sharks are chasing. Alone in the water, she looks even tinier. Vulnerable.

She's not acting like an omega who wants to steal my pack. She acts like she doesn't want to be here.

I feel like an ass for yelling at her, letting my instincts ride me. I want to apologize. Maybe even come to a truce. Have a real conversation where I warn her away without ripping off her face.

Before I can second-guess, I'm already walking to the lake.

The lake's far enough away that it's off our property, but when I reach the shore, Lilah's still grinding laps. I pull up a log next to her pile of clothes, sniffing for pheromones.

There's no scent.

She doesn't notice me, swimming, swimming, swimming until *I* start to get tired. When she finally crawls out of the water, I realize how deeply I've miscalculated.

Water soaks her white bra and cotton panties, revealing the blush pink skin underneath. My heart stutters. She's delicate and vulnerable. Alpha candy.

Everything I'll never be.

She's an enemy. An omega.

All the reasons I shouldn't react to her.

My dick doesn't get that memo.

I'm rock fucking hard like one of my alphas has me splayed out, pinned on a knot so big I can feel it in my lungs.

She's *female* for shit's sake.

I fell for Atlas long before I thought about being attracted to women, but one flash of her pouty plump lips, hard nipples, and tight wet body, and holy fucking *fuck* do I want to do some exploring.

Lilah's nostrils flare, catching my raging perfume. Her grey eyes widen like a mouse who just noticed the raptor circling. She ducks, half covering herself, half submitting.

Still an asshole, I remind myself.

"Here." I whip off my hoodie and toss it to her.

She catches it awkwardly, holding it away from her body like a dirty diaper. Her nose wrinkles. "I can't."

"You're shivering," I insist. "And I want to talk. It'll be easier if you're carrying my scent." Total bullshit—I shouldn't want *anyone* wearing my scent but my mates—but I'm curious what I smell like spread all over Lilah Darling's skin.

With a strained expression, she pulls the hoodie over her head, breathing high and shallow. I'm not quite close enough to see, but I swear her pupils dilate.

I stare, trying to understand this strange girl.

Trying to understand my reaction to her.

Mostly trying to understand why the fuck an enemy omega looks *so unholy good* draped in my shirt.

“If you don’t want me to swim…” She shifts from foot to foot.

“You can swim.” I scrub a hand through my hair, frustrated at myself for so many reasons. “I want to apologize for earlier. I can’t think when you’re in the house.”

She lets out a huff. “I get it. I’m surprised you haven’t stabbed me.”

“Not yet.” But if she starts perfuming, hide the knives.

“I didn’t know.” She peeks hesitantly from under lashes so thick I lose track of the conversation.

“What?”

“I didn’t know Wyvern Pack had an omega. I didn’t want to be here anyway, but I never would’ve agreed if I knew. I promise I’ll stay away from your alphas.” Lilah submits, showing her neck, and the twisted, always tightening knots inside me finally loosen.

“Is it crazy that I’m waiting for you to perfume and steal them?”

“That’ll never happen.” She rubs her arms, shuddering. “I’m out of here the second I figure out how to pay off my debt.”

There’s something in the way Lilah never tests my gaze that makes me believe her. “Does Scorpio know that’s your plan?”

“He didn’t give me a choice. I’m a *Darling*.”

I’ve never thought much about the OCC’s wards. It must suck ass with no one looking out for you. I could start to imagine, except the crazy part of me isn’t big on compassion for the competition. “I’d say make yourself at home, but…”

She laughs bitterly. “I get it.”

She really does.

In a rare fusion between my crazy and sane halves, I step to her, pulling out the marker I brought just for this.

I take her slender wrist. She’s chilly from the water, and her pulse quickens under her near-translucent skin. I can’t help sniffing as I scrawl the Wi-Fi password on Lilah’s palm.

She smells like lake water. And piney, masculine shampoo.

The first, fine.

The second, *motherfuckingshit*.

I drop the marker, a warning rumble vibrating my chest.

She freezes.

“Hunter’s shampoo,” I growl, ready to rip into her, tear her away from my mates.

“Go.” She ducks lower, showing submission that clears my head just enough to listen to what she’s saying. “You’ll feel better when you can’t scent me.”

I sprint to the house.

As soon as my nose clears, so does my head.

I climb the porch steps and lean against the back door, chest heaving.

All I can see are Lilah’s grey eyes, and a single thought ricochets through my strung-out brain.

Why does my enemy understand me better than my own goddamned pack?

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FIFTEEN

LILAH

ORION'S FLY-BY leaves me with whiplash. As soon as he's out of sight, I tear off his hoodie and dive into the lake. I was so exhausted I could barely crawl out of the water, but Orion's sweet scent jolts my system like a mouthful of coffee syrup.

That poison apple scent won't wash out.

I swear my nipples are perked because of the cold, not because of him. The curl of warmth in my belly is harder to explain away.

Shitballs.

Even the Wyvern pack's *omega* is torturing my hormones. The more I scent them, the more I'm around them, the closer my awakening creeps.

I crush laps until I can barely keep my head above the water. Then I finally claw back to shore. When I tossed Orion's hoodie, it landed on my pile of clothes. Everything's soaked in apple cider, and shrugging into my sweats feels like doing a shot of sweetness.

Laundry just became the goal of my life.

I run to the house while trying to hold my breath, but crisp apple creeps into my throat.

I'm more careful when I'm on the property, stopping behind a tree to make sure no one's around. I tiptoe into the basement and press my ear against the gym door before picking the lock again.

Even bracing for it, I choke on a whiff of Hunter's rich smoke. His leftover sweat and pheromones are thrown down like a sex gauntlet.

All five of the guys have clothes piled around the washer and dryer, all filthy with their scents in the way that shouldn't be so fucking good. Atlas's leather, Hunter's mezcal, Finn's spicy orange, and Jett's deep, mysterious cedar, all cut through with Orion's apple-like-an-orgasm.

I strip down, not giving a shit about anything while I'm fighting those scents and the butterflies in my stomach.

Fuckers need their wings hacked off.

Tossing my stuff into the washed-but-not-dried clothes already in the machine, I pour a ridiculous amount of de-scenting solution in with the soap and start the load.

Once it's rumbling, I dart back to my room for a shower—this time *without* Hunter's damned body wash that's destined for the trash.

In clean sweats, I finally key in the Wi-Fi password that Orion scrawled on my hand. It feels like he *branded* me, and I'll need ten more showers before I can escape his touch.

Sweet, sweet internet finally connects on my tablet.

I do a happy dance, wiggling my ass, then flee to the garden. The Wi-Fi reaches the gazebo, which isn't my favorite place, but I relax as soon as I'm out of the house, away from the cameras and scents and never-ending feeling that I'm being watched, judged, and found wanting by the men my body insists are meant to be mine.

I don't need men. I need *money*. Which, unfortunately, means I need work.

Thanks to my goal of failing every class at the OCC, I've taken a million-and-one subjects. Most were for grooming pretty, happy omegas who know how to thrive in a pack. Subjects like nail care, fitness, and nutrition.

After dance, my favorite class by far was pack management. It taught budgeting for girls graduating to manor homes and million-dollar checkbooks, so we spent weeks on finance.

Who knew? I love money math.

I couldn't get an official accounting certification before, but now the only thing stopping me is the cost of the program. If I can cover that, I'll be in business. In the meantime, I'll take any bookkeeping work the internet can deliver.

I spend the next few hours posting resumes and responding to ads on job boards. I'm desperate enough to take *anything*.

By twilight, I'm shivering and near starving.

I dread going back in the house. I dread smelling a single one of those alphas, feeling their eyes on me, let alone Craig and the surveillance cams.

But as much as I want to avoid everything, I do not camp.

The basement steps feel like the walkway where beef cows get lined up for their electric shock.

Inside, I pause to listen. Thankfully, the house is silent. I turn over my laundry and give in to the urge to tidy, holding my breath as I start another load of their clothes.

If their scents are poison, their dirty jeans and T-shirts are radioactive. I want them de-scented and gone. While my stuff tumbles dry, my eyes wander the gym.

Thick workout mats cover the floor. The gym's stocked with weight benches and cardio machines as nice as the ones at the OCC. Punching bags take up a whole corner, and I'd spend hours working out my frustration if I could stomach swimming in Hunter's scent.

The far wall cupboard is stacked with protein bars like the pack's preparing for a siege, so I don't feel guilty stealing from their stash. I nibble at a cardboard-tasting bar and squeeze into the space between the washer

and dryer, where I finally feel less exposed. The warmth and rumble take the edge off. The closest thing I'll ever have to an alpha's comforting purr.

I can stick this out.

I'll pay back my debt and bounce as soon as I can, and not one of the Wyverns will ever realize the deep, dark truth that has to be a lie.

Their scents say we belong together.

That's why I can never let them taste mine.

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SIXTEEN

HUNTER

I'M glad I didn't drink last night because a hangover would be the shit icing on this day. My knuckles clench, aching for a bag or a face to smash. While the Redfang cartel tears up the city, looking for revenge, our pack leader digs at Finn and me like *we're* the enemy.

"You shouldn't have taken her out," Atlas growls for the twentieth time, angrily flicking the turn signal as the four of us head home from Wyvern House.

"She was already out," Finn says beside me. "We just took her *farther*."

"She needed help," I clarify instead of ripping into him the way he needs.

Also, she was bleeding every-fucking-where.

We may not want the omega, but we can't neglect her to death.

"Craig stocked the kitchen. Leave her in the basement where she belongs." Jett rides shotgun, looking like ice, but the hum of tension through our pack bond won't let our brother lie. He's wound way too fucking tight.

"It's all empty," Finn says, oddly passionate. "And it smells like mold."

Atlas growls. "Fucking *Craig*."

The guy is an ass, but an ass we're stuck with.

If we're talking about asses, I'd rather be stuck with Lilah's…

But we’re not talking about Lilah.

We’re not talking about the pack or the problems we need to address, because my brothers love them some denial. I see every fucking issue. Every fucking thing.

Don’t get me started on Orion.

I’ve tried leveling with Atlas. But truth hurts. He didn’t want to hear shit when we were fifteen and he crushed Orion’s heart.

He doesn’t want to hear shit now when he’s doing the same.

Calling these assholes out never works. *Never*.

When Finn was spiraling, I called him out hard. Told him to stop mixing booze and bikes. Stop with the booze altogether, because that shit would get him killed. He needed therapy, not another hit of adrenaline and oblivion.

And what did Finn fucking do?

He said I didn’t understand. He said I was overreacting.

Then he picked a fight with an MC, stole a bike, and crashed into a fence high off his ass, lucky he lost a tooth and not his entire skull.

What worked?

Beating the shit out of him and promising to do the same again and again and again if I ever caught him high on any substance stronger than tap water.

Talking doesn’t solve shit.

I could tell my pack brothers their problems all the livelong day. Finn’s desperate, Atlas keeps choosing duty over his mate, and fucking Jett is so far in denial, he needs a pickaxe to dig out of his own ass.

And Lilah…

I can still picture her, passed out in the back of my truck. Bleeding. Not asking for help. At first, flinching away from touch, then soaking up attention like an omega starved.

She’s too vulnerable, too sweet, and way too much fucking trouble.

Lilah is the match that’ll set every one of us on fire.

We stop to pick up Chinese, and the air between us stays suffocatingly thick. We need to clear it, or I need to pound a bag until my knuckles are hamburger.

When we get home, Atlas and Jett stomp inside, leaving Finn and me to carry the bags. Most nights, we're back too late to eat as a pack. Tonight, Orion waits for us in the doorway.

"Rough day?" he asks, rubbing his arms against the tension vibrating through our pack bonds.

When no one answers, he deflates and his scent goes sour apple.

I feel like the only one with basic senses. Or a conscience. I grab Orion around his shoulders and steer him toward the kitchen, wishing the guys would s*ee* how he perks up at the smallest touch. "Day's over. Want to eat together?"

"Yeah." Orion gives this happy, heart-breaking smile that the others don't register.

Finn rips into the takeout bags as soon as we hit the kitchen, and everyone pulls out their food while I side-eye the cleared-off countertops. "Did Craig clean?"

"Not exactly," Orion says, not meeting my eyes.

"Did you?" Atlas asks, already rumbling. "That's not your job."

"Lilah did."

We all freeze, mid-bite.

"Why the hell was she upstairs?" Atlas knocks back his chair with an angry screech.

"I gave her the Wi-Fi password. We talked. She's not... She's not awful." Orion pokes at his sweet and sour chicken. "She promises she doesn't want to stay."

"What if I want to keep her?" Finn asks dreamily, oblivious when Orion flinches.

"Not happening." *Fucking idiot.* I smack his shoulder.

I was worried for about thirty seconds last night when Finn started obsessing. But he didn't mention Lilah once today unless someone else brought her up, and he conveniently forgot she existed when he put in our dinner order. He only sees her as a toy, switchable with any one of his bikes.

"Craig told her to put shit away," Orion says.

"We need to get rid of them both," Jett says through gritted teeth.

"Soon." Atlas stares toward the basement like he's going to bull down there and drag the girl out to the curb. "We can't push back right now. As soon as we deal with the Redfangs, we'll have space to negotiate with Scorpio."

Now it's the Redfangs.

Next week, we'll be dealing with some other shit.

There's always something, always some reason to push off making the hard changes. *Numbskulls need to realize this.*

I wolf down dinner, then give in to the itch in my veins and jog downstairs. I'm taping my hands for a marathon punch-shit session when I spot the too-thin girl squeezed between the washer and dryer.

Lilah holds a crumbled protein bar wrapper, and a crumb of chocolate clings to the corner of her lush lips. A protective rumble builds behind my sternum. I pull in my diaphragm until the sound dies the way it needs to.

She might not smell omega. She sure as fuck doesn't act omega, but instinct doesn't lie. Even if she's not *my* omega, I can't leave Lilah alone.

I wish she were a bitch. Like one of the gold-digging snobs at the Center who licks their lips and pants over dollar signs when Wyvern Pack rolls through. The salty, whiny, spoiled ones who believe they deserve the best of the best.

I honestly thought all omegas were like that, which is why I co-signed quick when Orion awakened. Wasn't looking forward to a hormone-fueled harpy owning my ass. Or my soul.

But then *Lilah*.

I knew she was trouble when I saw her dance. Her silky, sensuous moves. The way she slid her hands over her smooth skin made me want to cover her fingers with mine.

Show her exactly where to touch and how hard.

Then in the gazebo. She didn’t submit easily. She’s fucking candy, making me imagine just how sweet it’ll be when she gladly bares her neck and gives herself to me.

Even when she needs help, she won’t ask.

I find Lilah in her swimsuit on the roadside with torn-up feet, and she wants nothing to do with me?

My alpha instincts weren’t having it, but I shouldn't have given in so hard. I may as well stick a tiara in that gorgeous hair and start calling her princess.

Lilah’s all huddled up in a protective ball, but her feet peek out. A splash of dried blood darkens her gauze, making that rumble kick up inside me again.

At first look, the girl is shit at taking care of herself.

Then my goddamned intuition chips in, because if hiding is her safe place, if suffering in silence has helped her get this far, I can imagine how badly she’s been treated.

Ah, fuck.

That’s not a truth I need rattling around my brain.

I already want to wrap her in a blanket and haul her into her nest.

No blanket. End this now.

I move to grab the crumpled protein bar wrapper. It crinkles, and she jolts like I was lunging for her throat. Her skull thunks the washer and she throws out fists.

“Whoa.” I lift my hands, hating that she wakes up so defensively. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Hunter,” she sighs breathily, her soft, sexy voice stroking my name like satin. She’s still tense, clutching her arms against her body, and uncomfortable this close to me.

I take the wrapper and use the excuse to step away, tossing it in the trash.

“Sorry.” She ducks her head. “I’ll leave.”

She squeezes from between the machines, wincing with stiffness.

Only I don’t mind Lilah in my space at all. I *like* seeing her here.

Lilah’s cute. A welcome break from the lifting equipment and metal. She’s all softness, even when she’s trying to hide. And better her than staring at my pack brothers’ ugly asses.

Except for Orion.

I struggle to picture them standing next to each other. They’d be all sunshine, rainbows, and snark. Two angels with smirks.

I brush off that never-gonna-happen image. “Isn’t there food in your room?”

“There’s baking soda.”

Fucking Craig. I stalk past her into the basement unit we half-assedly cleaned out when Scorpio announced he was sticking us with a second omega.

Finn’s right about the mold. And Lilah’s right about the empty cupboards.

“I’ll take you grocery shopping. Tomorrow?”

She makes a noise at the back of her throat. “That’s not necessary. I’m in enough debt.”

I slam the cupboard, wincing when she jumps. *Why* is she so jumpy?

I would never hurt her. But I’m realizing that plenty of people would.

What the hell are they doing at the Center?

Yeah, Darlings are their own shitty case, but I’ve never met a female so standoffish. Omegas flirt and touch like nymphos.

I’ve clocked it. One cougar started rubbing all up on me in five seconds flat.

Omegas can’t help seeking alpha attention.

But Lilah doesn’t want my attention at all with the way she hunches, her gaze darting toward the exit. She doesn’t look me in the eye.

“You won’t owe us anything. The least we can do is keep you fed.”

She chews her plump lower lip.

I twist, praying she misses the bulge in my shorts.

“I could grocery shop for the pack…” She tenses, then the words flow out too fast. “If it’s not overstepping, I mean. I saw what Craig brought home and there’s no real food in the house for Ori—for you guys. Sorry. I know it’s not my business.”

“No. That would be sweet. Do you cook?” We eat absolute shit because we all studied covert ops instead of culinary arts. We’re relying on that douche Craig to pick up incidentals and run errands until Orion’s hormones level out enough to hire actual help. The man thinks gummy bears form the base of the food pyramid.

Turns out, the asshole can’t even be trusted with groceries. He was supposed to leave the basement stocked.

“I’ve taken a few classes,” Lilah hedges.

“Better than nothing.” Any hot food will taste better than more beef jerky for shit’s sake. And the thought of Lilah in our kitchen, all tied up in a frilly apron makes me all primal. “Is seven too early? We can hit town before work.”

“Just us?” She chews her lip again.

“Just us,” I repeat. “Why?”

“The others don’t like me.”

“Even Finn?” I watch her closely, testing her answer.

Lilah doesn’t disappoint, even though I wish she would. Just once. It would be easier to boot her if she acted anything how we expected.

Lilah rolls her eyes. “He likes females. That doesn’t mean he likes *me*.”

Good instincts.

“And me?” The question slips out before I realize what I’m asking.

Lilah tilts her head, and her innocent attention has me swallowing hard. “You don’t hate me, but I don’t think you like me either. That’s honestly how I hope you all treat me until I’m out of here.”

I frown, finding myself eager to argue the other side. “You won’t stay? If you awaken—”

“I won’t,” she bites out.

“Sure.” I’m not here to argue, even if my alpha instincts keep acting up around the girl. Speaking of which. “How are your feet?”

“Fine now.” She curls in her toes. *So cute.*

“I’ll bring you some dinner.” I head upstairs, workout forgotten, frustration re-purposed.

“You don’t have to—”

“But I’m going to.”

She laughs softly. But when I turn, she’s darting into the nest, hiding in the darkness. Maybe I imagined the sound.

No one bothered to put away the leftover Chinese, so I make her a plate of beef, broccoli, and rice, and nuke the shit out of it. Juggling a soda, a few bottles of water, and a fortune cookie, I head back to her.

“Lilah?”

She peeks out of the nest, all big eyes and puffy, tangled hair.

So. Fucking. Cute.

And shit.

I can’t start thinking of her like this. It’s a slippery slope that goes from feeding to fucking, and then I’ll be following the girl like a puppy dog, begging her to take my mating bite.

Orion already wears my mark.

You can have more than one, my lizard brain chips in. I damn near snort. A pack with *two* omegas?

Like we need another target on our asses.

Another soulmate to protect.

It's hard enough keeping Orion safe, and he's spent more than a decade training as a Wyvern House agent. Guns. Combat. Tech. Kid can defuse a bomb in ten seconds, smelling like applesauce and sin.

Not for the first time, probably not for the hundredth time in so few hours, I wonder what Lilah will smell like when she perfumes. She will, no matter what she thinks, no matter what games she's playing to slow her hormones.

Peaches? Maybe cake batter.

Whatever it is, you know she'll taste sweet.

"Dinner." I set down the food like we haven't just been staring at each other this whole time.

"Thank you." Instead of sitting at the two-seater table, Lilah snatches the plate like a mouse stealing the last crumb of cheese and scurries back to her nest.

I don't think she's afraid of me, specifically

I think Lilah Darling is afraid of *everyone*.

"See you at seven." She disappears into the dark nest, pushing the heavy door shut behind her.

"Good night," I say too late, left staring at the door.

If Orion did the same, I'd pound that shit down until he let me in. That hasn't changed. Back in the day, even before he awakened and perfumed, the guys and I always felt protective of him.

It only clicked years later.

Why the four of us—raised together from birth and tighter than brothers—were so quick to bring new blood into our fold.

I think we always knew what Orion was. I watched out for him, whether guys at the academy tried to start shit, jealous at his position in our pack, or Atlas shot him with another casually heart-crushing barb.

I gave Orion my cheese sticks at lunch. I reminded him to pack an umbrella when the weather said rain.

Finn is my hetero life-mate, and I'd never remind that asshole to dress warm.

Orion was always different.

Just like Lilah's different.

Only, I don't know if I'm treating her like this because she's omega or because she's *ours*.

I don't know what this girl is, but she's not what Jett fears. Not what Atlas suspects or Orion dreads. Not a slut or an invader or enemy or any of the other names they're probably calling her in their twisted skulls.

What I'm most afraid of?

Lilah Darling might be our biggest hope. Or she's about to tear our pack a-fucking-part.

All I can do is wait and see which way the coin falls.

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SEVENTEEN

LILAH

I FALL asleep with a belly full of rice and Hunter's smoke invading my dreams. Orion stars in my fantasy feature, playing the knight in shining armor who rescues me from a troll and licks me head to toe for reasons that make total sense in the middle of the night.

When my alarm beeps, I wake up panting, my thighs pressed hard together against the ache of what I *hope to god* wasn't a freaking sleep orgasm.

My hormones need to chill. I don't care if I'm surrounded by muscled, steamy, tempting, *beautiful* men.

We can't play this game.

I *cannot* awaken. I can't start to let them think of me as a potential mate. Not for one second.

After a cold shower, in clean clothes, I throw in another load of laundry, then creep up the stairs, listening to the house at every step. Footsteps sound and coffee mugs clink in the kitchen.

No way am I bumping into my housemates and their brain-fogging pheromones. I slink up the back steps, popping out in the lawn and stealthily making my way around front, dew soaking my sneakers. My feet itch. The bottoms are all scabbed over, but no one's going to catch me complaining.

Like the creeper I am, I lean half-hidden against the corner of the garage. I peek inside and spot a few empty car slots.

Did Hunter already leave?

“You’re late,” says a harsh, beta voice worse than a constipated rooster.

I whip around to find Craig sneering at me in khakis and a white collared shirt. He looks like a third-rate caddy. Or the guy who drives beers to the golfers in a D-list rom-com. My nose wrinkles at the wet cardboard smell of his pheromones.

“I’m supposed to be meeting Hunter.” I hug the wall, not showing submission, but not acting dominant. Hopefully, Craig will forget I exist after this chat.

“The pack got called into HQ. Hunter told me to take you to the grocery store.” He holds up a black card, looking so smug, I’m almost positive this is a special treat for him. I hope it’s just the card he’s gloating over, and not the chance to boss me around.

“I’ll take a rain check.”

“Wait,” he shouts so quickly I can’t help but stop. “Alpha Hunter said it, so you’re going. Don’t try to get out of work.” He clicks a key fob, making the SUV chirp.

I weigh the options.

Shopping spree on the pack? Or hide out and lose Hunter’s goodwill?

When Craig struts for the car, I decide I deserve ice cream now that the image of his khaki wedgie is seared into my brain. I move toward the passenger door.

“I’m not your chauffeur.” Craig tosses the keys.

I catch them, a frown puckering my brows. “I don’t have a license.”

“But you can drive?”

“Technically.” Driver’s ed was one of my many, many OCC electives, but I never passed the test and I never practiced.

“Then drive.”

“That’s not—”

“I’m not carting you all over town,” Craig snarls.

I clench the keys until metal bites my palm. He wants me to drive, I’ll drive.

The car is way bigger than the beater sedan my driver’s ed teacher let us kick around campus, but the seatbelt and key work the same. I figure it’s all gravy, minus the too-tempting alpha scents embedded in the upholstery.

I open my window to air out while Craig climbs in back. He doesn’t buckle, sitting with his phone and leaving me to play driver. I’d rather play along than deal with his whining, so I search for the closest grocery store on the GPS and roll out.

Driving is fine on the driveway and country roads, but I forgot how fast cars go. And why is the road so *narrow?*

I drive thirty the whole way to town, getting flipped off three times and almost hitting a shrub that someone planted way too close to the fucking road.

Craig mutters under his breath, but so what?

Bastard could’ve called an Uber.

“Park at the coffee shop,” Craig says, waving to the cute café spot across the lot from the grocery store. He hands me the black card like he’s leaving one of his organs in my care. “Wait by the car when you’re done. And pick up some energy drinks.”

He hops out and ducks into the shop.

I’m nervous in public for literally the first time in my life, but being alone is so much better than being stuck with Craig. Tucking the credit card safely into my bra, I grab a cart and head inside.

I’ve only seen grocery stores in the movies.

It’s more colorful than I imagined, the bakery smells amazing, and I can’t fucking fathom why there need to be five hundred kinds of cheese, but I am *on board* this crazy mozzarella train.

Pushing my cart, I duck down. It feels like people are looking at me, sneaking glances from the corners of their eyes. Because no perfuming omega should ever be out on her own.

A male beta passes so close I consider stabbing him an extra air hole. When his sniff comes up blank, his creepy eager smile fades and he darts down the aisle.

Whatever I smell like, I *look* omega, and not even shrugging into my hoodie hides the come-mess-with-me aura.

I have a scowl for that.

I don't plan to cook anything complicated, so I grab the basics that the Wyvern pack's missing. Stuff for grilled cheeses, spaghetti, and salads. Ground beef and buns for burgers.

They're set on condiments for life.

My cart's already heaped when I hesitate in the baking aisle, wondering if I could get away with making Craig a cake filled with rat poison.

"New pack?" A female voice chirps.

The small blonde offers a warm smile that's wrecked by her hulking alphas who study me like I'm a grocery store terrorist.

"*Honestly*." She scoffs, then playfully shoves them away. "I'll meet you at the front."

"But babe," her alpha whines.

"You shouldn't be alone," the other insists, both big men pressing her tight to her cart like a sniper could be ducking behind the bags of sugar.

"You forgot my ice cream," she whines back.

They both tense, trade a glance, and suddenly they're sprinting down the aisle, chased by the soft sound of their omega's laughter.

I should relax now that the big dudes are gone, taking their dominance to the dairy section, but to me, omegas are the scariest.

The sweeter they smile, the faster they go for your throat.

“I wasn’t looking at your mates.” I duck behind my cart, hoping she’ll leave me alone.

“Of course not.” Her smile fades. “You just looked a little lost, and I thought… You *are* omega?”

“Not awakened,” I answer. Even if this conversation is too personal for a grocery store chat, I want to make it super clear I’m not a threat.

Not to her or anyone else.

“Got it. But you’re shopping for your pack?” She gestures at my overflowing cart.

“Yeah.”

“How many?”

“Five.”

“Wow. I have my hands full with three.” The way her thoughts move to her mates has her smiling brightly again, her perfume bursting in a cloud that smells like fruity breakfast cereal.

I cringe.

I can’t imagine my “mates” causing joy. I also can’t imagine them racing to grab my favorite kind of ice cream, or even caring to know that it’s almond cake—the limited-edition flavor I’ve only had twice in my life thanks to OCC parties.

It makes me feel sad. Lost.

Not that I want that life.

“Well, the rule for alphas is to make three times more than you think you need.” The woman points to a box of marble cake from the most expensive brand. “But don’t stress. They’re your mates. They’ll love anything if you’re the one making it.”

Right. *That* I can imagine.

Hunter and Finn might humor me, Finn probably making some excuse to feed me. Atlas would rumble disapproval, Jett would try to burn me up

with hate-powered eyebeams, and Orion would finally snap, just straight up pile-driving my face into the cake and suffocating me in frosting.

Death by buttercream.

“Oh. Well. Have a good day.” The woman hurries away with her cart, finally picking up on the leave-me-alone vibe that I work so hard to cultivate.

Steering down the rows, I make sure to pick up foods filled with the nutrients that omegas need. Every time I toss something in for Orion, I swear I scent the tang of fresh-pressed cider. I don’t understand how an omega can draw me so hard.

I know that he shouldn’t, but that doesn’t change the facts.

There’s only one solution to my problem: *I need so much fucking ice cream.*

The pack’s black card burns a hole in my bra. One teensy pint added to the bill won’t send them knocking on my door.

I’m standing in front of the freezer case with greedy eyes locked on the gold-lidded container of almond cake ice cream when a growl rattles every one of my vertebrae on its way to the pit of my stomach.

Atlas tears down the aisle, bigger than I remember, and madder too. A shit-smug Craig skips behind him.

“Why is it impossible to get in touch with you?” Atlas growls.

“Craig knew where to find me.” I glance at the beta, but he gazes at Atlas like he’s worshipping the sun god.

Way to kick me under the bus.

I fight the wave of crushing dominance, but it feels like being crushed under layers and layers of thick, suffocating leather.

Even worse?

I’m not sure if I’ll be flattened or I’ll roll over and beg him to do it harder.

“Follow me,” Atlas barks, and my feet are moving before I can blink. “Pay for the cart,” he calls to Craig before marching me out of the store.

I spare a last wistful glance for the pint of ice cream that’ll never be mine.

Goodbye, my love!

On the way out, I spot the blonde omega.

Her jaw drops, and I wonder what she thinks of my escort. He’s nothing like the sweet mate she must have been imagining. In Wyvern House uniform, all black camo, he looks like a drill sergeant hauling me off for fifty lashes.

“Get in the car,” he barks when we reach his truck.

Helpless, I climb inside, choking on alpha, heady musk and leather mixed with Orion’s throat-tickling sweetness.

“Scorpio summoned you,” Atlas announces as he starts the truck. He vibrates, glaring at the road, but even though he’s not looking at me, his presence crushes like a black hole.

I slide as far into the door as possible, widening the space between us. “What does he want?”

“He and the other dads want to make sure you’re settling in.”

“Other dads?”

“Kieran and Max.”

Wonderful. Because I need more alphas in my life.

“Whatever they ask, just say that you’re getting to know us and there are no problems.”

“We *don’t* have problems.” The guys are mostly leaving me alone, and even with Craig, I’m not being treated any worse than I was at the OCC.

“If you try to start shit…” Atlas flicks the turn signal too hard, his scent spiking ominously prickly.

My instincts have me curling up, afraid of the big bad alpha, but I shut that shit down, gripping the edge of the seat and forcing myself to hold my

space. If I can make my intentions clear to the pack leader, he'll handle the rest of the pack. "You know your dad bought me, right? I'm only here because Hikaru threatened to awaken me with hormones if I didn't sign on to be your pack's breeder."

"Hikaru did *what?*" Atlas pumps the brakes.

I'm thrown against my seatbelt, air forced out of my lungs. I rub my breastbone with a wince while Atlas stops the car in traffic.

"They forced you to sign?" The intensity in his honey-brown gaze has me squirming for reasons that need to be stomped.

They *did* give me a choice, only it was like choosing death by being burned or buried alive. "It was join your pack and no forced awakening or hormone shots and into rotation."

Cars fly by us, honking while Atlas grips the wheel hard enough to make the plastic creak. His square jaw strains like he's chewing diamonds.

"You didn't know?"

Atlas doesn't answer.

He weaves back into traffic muttering, and the only words that make sense are, "I have to speak with them."

It would be excellent if Atlas started pitying me. Maybe he'll pity me so much he lets me build my spinster cabin on the back of the pack's property. "I don't want bites, and I don't want your pack. Aren't we all just trying to survive?"

"Just don't rock the boat."

Me?

I'm the motherfucking captain of the *S.S. Do Not Disturb.* It's a stealth ship, slipping silently over the waves, bothering no one, and hopefully someday soon, fading into the mist, never to be seen again.

I guess if I *wanted* fated mates, I'd cross oceans to make them mine.

But Wyvern Pack belongs to Orion and always will.

I'm just sailing through.

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EIGHTEEN

LILAH

WYVERN HOUSE HQ is built for intimidation. Atlas drives us to the huge facility outside the city where we pass through multiple gates, checkpoints, and a retinal scanner just to land a parking spot.

Atlas avoids looking at me, but I can *feel* his constant awareness like an extra layer of security. Not that this place needs any help with all its barbed wire and cameras.

When Atlas climbs out of the truck, I scramble to unbuckle and follow. Trailing behind, I can't miss the way his heavy boots and black pants show off his muscular legs and ass.

I need to be slapped.

We walk through a guardhouse where a super deferential beta reverently greets Atlas as *sir*. He offers me a guest pass with both hands and a bow, never once making eye contact out of blatant deference that puts me on defcon levels of alert.

I pin the badge to my sweatshirt, feeling out of place and spooked. I didn't dress for a military hearing, let alone someplace where people would treat me as a respected pack's omega.

I feel like a fake. A liar.

And I want to punch myself in the face, because some deep, dark part of me is like a dried-up little bean sprout leaning toward the light, loving the

change in status. As if we're *owed* this kind of treatment.

Except I'm not.

And never will be.

After passing a door with a fingerprint scanner, we pop into an atrium that smells like plastic, sweat, and a whole lot of alpha. I catch a hint of chlorine and ache to dive below the water and hide where I can't smell or hear anything but the too-fast pounding of my heart.

Atlas doesn't care if I can keep up with his giant legs. The halls are packed with trainees in Wyvern House gear who stare so hard, I feel like the lost little bunny who hopped into a wolf hunt.

If I were Orion, Atlas would warn them the fuck off, growling, holding me close, and soaking me with his scent so every single alpha knew exactly who I belonged to.

Instead, he's hanging me out to dry.

My shiv works miracles against uppity teen omegas, but these dudes are straight-up mercenaries, trained and built for murder.

I have no chance if one of them wants to claim me and Atlas is all *help yourself, bro*.

So I scurry behind him, not sure which of us I hate the most.

When the scent of the pool is long gone, and all I can smell is alpha, I catch a familiar whiff of iron. Atlas walks through the double-doors to a massive office suite where a pretty beta secretary pops up from her desk in the plush lounge.

"The founders are waiting for you in the first sitting room, Mr. Wyvern." She tips her head to Atlas.

I follow him, bracing for impact.

Wishing I could hide behind Atlas's shoulders—because there'd be plenty of space back there if I were the kind of omega he wanted to protect—I step into the sitting room.

Four scary-dominant scents hit me like a club.

Scorpio and Hikaru Wyvern sit on either side of a sofa. One man sits in the corner, half-hidden with the way his chair's turned.

The fourth rushes me.

"Lilah!" A big bearded Latin dude who's Hunter's older clone squeezes me into the bone-crushingest bear hug of my life.

I go rigid.

I don't like being touched, being covered in a man's scent before I even know his name.

"Put her down, Max," Scorpio barks. "You're making her uncomfortable."

"Truly?" Holding me a foot off the floor, he lifts me out like he's checking out a picture frame. "My bad. I was too excited to meet my daughter-in-law."

The bottom falls out of my stomach, probably making an acid stain on the carpet.

Daughter-in-law?

Atlas looks like he swallowed a woodland creature, and I *wish* I were on that same wavelength.

Instead, the sneaky, shoved-down part of me I hate goes all smug.

They're my fated mates' fathers.

Of course they want to meet me! They'll adore me!

Ha.

Dream on, little girl.

"Have a seat." Scorpio motions to the empty sofa across a coffee table set with donuts and carafes. "Are you hungry, Lilah?"

I'm always hungry. Especially for glaze. But surrounded by five linebacker alphas, with Atlas looming at my side, there's no way I can take a single bite. "I already ate."

"How are things at the house?" Hikaru asks, getting right to the point. In a sleek suit, with his dark hair slicked back, he looks like Lucifer's right-

hand man. *Just like Jett.*

Clearing my throat, I shake away thoughts of the too-pretty mate I've barely even let myself look at. "Everything's fine."

"Just fine?" Max drops into his armchair. "What do we need to do to make you more comfortable?"

"Nothing." I blink at the guy, seriously thrown off by his attitude. Max has Hunter's same jacked build and dark, tanned coloring, though a few curls of grey sneak into his beard. He's disarming in the same way as Hunter, especially because I'm always off balance when someone wants me around.

"Craig says you're not integrating with the pack?" Hikaru narrows his eyes.

"Craig isn't a reliable source." Atlas's knuckles crack. "I want to have him transferred."

"That can be arranged." Scorpio steeples his thick fingers like he's negotiating an arms deal. "Assuming Lilah integrates instead."

More threats.

Fun.

Atlas's jaw clenches. Guy's going to crack a tooth. "She's integrating. She was doing our grocery shopping before you called in a meeting."

Instead of rolling my eyes, I pull the pack's card from my bra and flash the room. It's my win that Craig has to pay for the cart. I would've thrown in more shit if I'd known. "They gave me the pack card. I've been making myself at home."

"She doesn't carry your scent." The man in the corner has a voice like a glacier cracking.

He rises from his chair, dips to grab a carafe, and refills his coffee, never once glancing at the mug.

Smooth and deadly, he bleeds the same killer instinct I catch buried under Finn's mischief.

But Kieran Wyvern doesn’t hide his darkness.

Maybe he can’t.

“We’re taking things slow,” Atlas says cautiously.

“And I’m not awakened,” I offer, feeling like my secrets will spill out any second while Kieran watches me with that killer’s gaze.

Hikaru’s deep *hmm* is a hive of wasps. “That could be changed. Easily. Shall I make you an appointment at the Wyvern Clinic?”

I tense like he just jabbed the needle in my throat. “You said you wouldn’t force me.”

“We won’t,” Scorpio says, “But the option is there. It might even make the transition easier if you can awaken in a controlled environment. Your perfume’s a time bomb.”

I swallow.

That’s always been a risk, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. The pheromone shots would be final.

Permanent.

“What’s the hold-up? I want to be a grandfather.” Max has a freaking twinkle in his eye, and I need to drill down into the carpet and die.

“No one’s thinking about kids,” Atlas says through gritted teeth.

I nod enthusiastically. I’m not sure I ever want to be a mother. And with this pack? I’d be beyond trapped.

I’d be…*theirs*.

Theirs in a way that terrifies me even more than going into rotation. At least then, *I’d* be the one throwing males away, a new pack for every heat.

“Put some thought on your future,” Hikaru says in the outwardly pleasant, but actually threatening tone that he spews like breathing. “If you can’t integrate, you have many other options.”

He’ll put me in rotation so fast.

I scoot closer to Atlas, hoping against hope that he’ll have my back. “I’m not looking at other options.”

“It’s good to see you getting along.” Scorpio smiles like we’re already picking baby names. “Is the pack up for a team-building mission?”

“A mission?” Atlas asks.

Scorpio offers him the thick card that was hiding under the donuts. It’s fancy stationery, the kind you only use for weddings. “The four of us were planning on representing Wyvern House at the Patrick Pack’s fundraising ball this weekend, but our younger generation should make the appearance. It’s past time for you to take over the networking side of the business. Bring your omegas.”

Omegas? Both? At a public event?

Orion will slaughter me, and I won’t even be mad.

I’m honestly starting to pity him. It makes sense none of the Wyverns care about me or what I want. I’m just some Darling bought on clearance and they’ve known me for thirty seconds.

But Orion is *theirs*.

Atlas freezes halfway to the invitation.

“Problem?” Scorpio asks.

“No problem.” He restarts, grabbing the invite so hard he crumples the thick paper.

“Good.” Scorpio gives a crisp, military nod. “Prove to us that you have your pack under control and you’ll be back on the active-duty roster.”

“Yes, sir,” Atlas says, crushing the invite in his grip.

Pressure thickens the air.

Scorpio watches Atlas with mountains of expectations while Hikaru side-eyes me, making sure I don’t forget his threat.

Meanwhile, Max glows like he’s already bouncing grandkids on both knees, and I’m afraid Kieran might snap our necks just because.

I hug a throw pillow while they chat, throwing me the occasional softball question.

As Atlas relaxes and the conversation turns to their business instead of his pack, I can’t help observing this new side of him.

He speaks confidently, with a rich, deep voice that would sound sinfully delicious barking me to flip over and let him do whatever the fuck he wants.

Treacherous butterflies take flight in my belly. I swallow hard, hoping they drown in stomach acid.

I need to shut down the horny ravings of my inner slut.

The Wyvern pack and I aren’t meant to be.

I don’t know how the six of us can survive a social event. If the pack treats me like Atlas has been, letting me walk on my own, so obviously unclaimed, the other alphas will gobble me up like a side of hash browns.

Orion won’t even have to dirty his hands. The ball will have plenty of omegas happy to gut me on principle.

You don’t move in on a mated pack.

But here I am. Wyvern Pack’s *secondary* omega.

No one with a single brain cell will believe I’m not in this position because I begged for it.

I sigh, ready for the inevitable fight.

Better carve a few more shivs to hide in my ballgown.

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NINETEEN

ATLAS

THERE'S NEVER a second I'm not aware of Lilah. She hugs a throw pillow that hides her tiny frame, and I sense every twitch she makes on the other side of the couch.

With the invitation clenched in my fist, I feel like I'm growling every response to the dads' "friendly check-in."

Lilah doesn't glance at the breakfast spread, ducking her head like she doesn't want to be here.

She hasn't made eye contact with anyone since Hikaru brought up hormone shots.

We're in the same shitty boat, both being threatened, both afraid of losing something vital.

The realization makes me sick.

I don't want to be her ally. I want her gone, off to her own life somewhere else.

The girl is poison candy.

"You should take Lilah dress shopping before the ball," Max says, not even trying to read the room.

"Of course." There's no way I'm watching Lilah try on dresses. Just the thought of her pale shoulders, all her soft skin out—

I won't betray Orion.

“Why don’t you show Lilah around the facility? Have her sit in on the boys’ classes,” Scorpio suggests.

Show around means show off that our pack’s going to claim her. I won’t take this lie that far. “I’ll drop her off with Hunter.”

She flinches ever so slightly, probably eager to get out of here.

Eager to be back in his arms?

I smelled Hunter on her earlier. Just a whiff, but I need to sit his ass down and find out what the hell’s going on. They shouldn’t be spending time together. They shouldn’t be alone together.

None of us should be alone with her, whether or not she’s awakened.

“I’ll give you the tour.” I stand, reluctantly offering her a hand while the dads are watching.

Lilah lets me pull her to her feet. Her fingers are impossibly small. She’s so much tinier than Orion. All clouds of dark hair and grey eyes, like a storm when he’s the sunshine.

She snatches her fingers away from me, and I can’t help breathing deep, trying to read the scent that would tell me exactly what she’s feeling.

But Lilah’s a blank. *Nothing*. I can’t even scent her shampoo.

“A moment. Alone?” Hikaru holds me back.

Glancing nervously between us, Lilah darts out, a mouse escaping a flock of barn owls.

The four alphas close in as soon as the door shuts. I draw myself to my full height. I’m taller than all but Uncle Kieran, and I’m just as broad and dominant as any of them, but I feel like a little boy again when they blast me with their power.

“Are you treating that girl right?” Kieran speaks in his same dead-cold voice, but the fact that he’s asking shows he’s beyond concerned.

“It’s not easy letting a strange omega in our pack home. We’re trying.”

“She didn’t eat.” Max frowns. “You need to feed her more.”

As if Hunter and Finn don’t have that fucking handled.

“I expect you to make your best effort,” my father says sternly. “I don’t believe you don’t feel anything for her.”

“She’s not awakened.” *Thank god for that.*

Hikaru scoffs. “You haven’t spoken to my son about her?”

“We’ve discussed Lilah as a pack.”

“Did you ask him how they met?” Hikaru throws me a curveball when I’m not even holding a bat.

“They know each other?”

“Don’t you wonder why she was never contracted? An omega that beautiful? It has nothing to do with being unawakened.”

I tense, not liking where this is going. “Where did they meet?”

“At the Center when they were five or six,” Scorpio answers. “Jett used to follow her around like a pup.”

“Does he remember?” I don’t believe it. Jett would’ve mentioned this.

He would’ve mentioned *her*.

Hikaru stares down his nose like an emperor passing a divine proclamation. “Lilah Darling is your pack’s fated mate.”

Mic drop.

It’s not true.

It can’t be.

“No,” I answer in a rush of breath. I take a second to calm myself, responding from my place as pack leader instead of raw instinct. “Based on her behavior? I doubt that’s the truth.”

There’s no way in hell an omega could hold herself back if she scented her fated mates. Especially from me.

The pull to bond the pack leader is too strong.

Lilah barely looks at me. She flinches from my touch. Avoids me just the way she should because I *already have* an omega.

Case closed.

“Wait and see,” my father says smugly.

“And treat her fucking right,” Kieran growls. “She’s walking like she took a beating.”

“We’d never hit her.” And who the hell would? Lilah’s so small, I could pick her up with two fingers.

“Re-read the girl’s records,” Hikaru insists. “She’s evasive. Jumpy. Always in a fight. Never attended events with alphas unless she was coerced. Lilah’s not going to trust your pack unless you earn it.”

“Is that why you gave her an ultimatum? I thought Wyvern House was above forcing omegas into pack bonds.” I let the statement hang, praying they’ll say that Lilah lied, that she was the one who jumped on the opportunity to worm her way into our pack.

“Lilah’s inevitable.” Scorpio claps a hand on my shoulder. “Take good care of her, son. She’s your future.”

Fuck.

They dragged Lilah into our nest, and we were ready to fight her off like an insurgent.

I never even glanced at her records.

So fucking sloppy.

I thought I knew everything I needed to know because she was an omega.

Turns out, I don’t know the first thing about Lilah Darling.

I need to know *every single thing* if I’m going to keep my pack together.

WHEN THE DADS finally let me free, Lilah isn’t waiting in the office, and the lack of her sets me rumbling like a tractor. “Where is she?”

The secretary jumps. “Said she wanted some air, sir. She stepped into the hallway.”

A strange sense of unease rides me. The corridor's empty, and I can't follow Lilah's scent.

Male laughter echoes down the hall.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm tearing toward the sound.

Turning the corner to a lounge, I find Lilah sitting surrounded by a pack of trainees. Six big alphas block her tiny frame. They crowd her on a sofa until all I can see between their bodies is the flash of Lilah's defiant glare.

"The hell is this?" I bark.

Their spines snap straight. The guy on the couch leaps to his feet, pulling away from her thigh like his hand's on fire.

It's fucking about to be.

I growl, anger and shame tearing up my throat in a deep bass rumble that makes every one of them flinch. Even Lilah.

I left her alone.

An omega.

I've been so stuck on what she can do to us, imagining her as some evil villainess, I forgot that she could be so vulnerable.

Unacceptable.

Their behavior…and mine.

I stalk to the pack leader, the one who touched her. My dominance hits him like a wall of cinderblocks. The asshole wilts, dropping his gaze and shoulders with a tremor in his hands.

"Do you think this omega wants your attention, trainee?"

"We were just being friendly, sir."

Lilah clutches a makeshift weapon between white-knuckled fingers.

It's not right in a way that makes me ache. "Your pack needs a lesson in how we treat omegas. Drop your classes and enroll in etiquette until the instructor rates you perfect gentlemen. I'll see you on the field at five every morning for the next week. Now apologize."

"Sorry, sir!" they shout in unison.

Goddamned idiots.

“Apologize to Lilah.” Her name feels like honey on my tongue.

Have I never said it out loud before?

“Sorry, Omega,” they mutter.

“Dismissed!” I bark, and the assholes scatter.

When they clear the room, Lilah shudders.

She has dark circles under her big eyes and a hint of yellow bruising in her hair. It’s not a healthy look, and it makes an unwelcome rumble build deep in my chest.

I should be protecting her.

Lilah’s not my omega, but she’s an omega in my care. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” She rubs her arms, chin tipped down and refusing to meet my gaze.

It shouldn’t be irritating, but I need to see the storm in her eyes. If I don’t make sure she’s okay, I won’t be able to sleep. *Another sin on my shoulders*. “They didn’t hurt you?”

“I had it under control.” She flashes a piece of sharpened plastic.

“Is that a toothbrush?”

Lilah makes the weapon disappear before I can get a closer look, tucking it into her waistband like she’s done it a thousand times. “I can protect myself.”

The announcement sinks a barb in my chest. She shouldn’t have to protect herself.

Fuck.

I’m failing again. Failing my pack. Failing this girl.

I drop into the chair across from her. I owe Lilah an apology, but the words stick in my throat like razors. I don’t want to make peace with her. I don’t want to give her a single thing that’ll give her hope she can stay. I’ll never do that to Orion.

I have to talk to Jett. And Hunter.

Shit. We need an all-hands meeting.

“The five of you can go,” Lilah says softly, dragging my attention back to her.

“Go where?”

“To the ball. I’ll pretend I’m sick.”

Lilah hugs her knees to her chest, flashing the frayed elastic at the bottom of her baggy sweat pants. I can’t scent the truth on her, but she strikes me as sincere. She’s not trying to manipulate anything.

She just wants to survive.

“You have to go. All of us have to go together.”

“I’ll stay out of your way.” She tucks her chin between her knees like a snail hiding in her shell.

I get the sudden urge to cup her cheek, lift her face, and stare her straight in the eyes. With a cough, I clear my head. “You can’t be alone at a party full of military alphas. The Patrick pack has their fingers in too many dirty pies.”

They’re the assholes who hired us to take out the Redfangs, and we’re not their only mercenary friends. Not many in our world have an honor code like Wyvern House.

We’ll have to watch Orion every second, and he wears our bites. Lilah’s unmarked. With or without her perfume, every alpha will be drooling like she’s on the menu.

“I’m used to being alone.” There’s a resignation in her voice that sends a wave of guilt crashing.

All I can do is shake it off. I promise to take better care of Lilah. To watch over her. But that’s where my responsibility ends. I have nothing else to give.

“Let’s go. I need to talk to Jett.” I get up, and Lilah follows a few steps behind me.

When I slow to let her catch up, she stops. I frown at her over my shoulder, aware of the trainees passing us with curious looks. “What are you doing?”

“Staying out of your way,” she answers matter-of-factly.

Goddamn it.

I’ve seriously fucked things up with her. Even worse, I know I can’t fix it.

“Keep up,” I grumble like an ass.

She scurries behind me until we reach Jett’s room. It’s the largest classroom in the training building, a giant arena. When the door swings open just before the bell, every trainee has a front-row seat for Lilah’s entrance.

The chatter cuts when they spot me. Then they spot *her* and it’s fucking chaos. Gasps, growls, and enough pheromone spikes to start a rutting orgy.

“Settle,” I bark, then turn to her with a softer tone. “Have a seat for a minute.”

Lilah reaches out like she wants to grab my sleeve, but before I can figure out what I’d do if she did, she darts up the steps. Grabbing a corner seat, she hunches so low her delicate chin touches her desk.

Every male tracks her smallest motion. Dogs licking their fangs.

Jett is the only exception, turned stubbornly toward me instead of the chaos I unleashed on his classroom.

“This can’t wait until after my lesson?” He grips the podium.

I drag him into the corner. Not that anyone gives a damn about us with Lilah in the room. “Did you know her when you were younger?”

Our bond tightens with Jett’s fear, and my gut clenches. *It can’t be true.*

“Hikaru told you?”

“He claims she’s our fated omega.”

“No. We have Orion,” he says with a hint of quaver in his voice.

“That’s what I told him.” I refuse to let the doubt creep in. I know Orion’s ours, and no matter what fantasies the dads cook up, that’s never going to change.

I can’t believe it.

There’s no way.

No goddamned way Lilah is meant to be ours.

She would’ve thrown herself at us.

And we would’ve let her.

“Take her to Hunter’s class. I can’t teach with her here.” Jett angles his body away from Lilah like he isn’t watching her every move from the corner of his eye.

Like I’m not doing the same shit.

Everyone’s watching her.

Jett’s frantic vibration pulls at my instinct to soothe my packmate, but this isn’t the place. Not with trainees looking on and him as skittish as a doe.

All I can do is change the subject. “What’s the news from the Redfangs?”

“They’re plotting. Dom wants blood.” Jett slowly pulls himself together, solidifying into the iceberg we know and love.

“Timeline?”

“Soon. We caught one of their foot soldiers, but he’s too low on the ladder to have any valuable intel.”

“Tell me when—” I cut off, my gaze snapping to the back of the room. An alpha trainee leans over Lilah, trying to cop a sniff.

“Asses in your seats,” I bark.

Metal screeches as a hundred trainees scramble for chairs. Lilah relaxes, and I catch another flash of purple plastic. “Shiv whittlin’,” I mutter.

We need to get her a real knife.

“What did you say?” Jett frowns, a finger-deep furrow forming between his brows.

“Nothing.” I shake myself, trying to scatter the sense of everything crashing down.

Have to protect Orion.

Have to protect the pack.

Have to protect Wyvern House.

The dads’ expectations, the Redfangs closing in, and now Lilah.

It’s terrifying how naturally instinct settles. Just hours ago, I was thinking of Lilah as my enemy.

Now she’s another life I have to protect.

I promise I’ll keep her safe.

And I fucking pray she’s gone before my instincts go any more berserk.

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TWENTY

LILAH

WHILE ATLAS and Jett whisper their secrets, I feel like I'm boiling in oil, surrounded by sniff-happy alphas. The guy sitting in front of me keeps turning to stare and I can feel his rumble through my chair legs. His dry grass scent mixes with dozens of others, sending my brain into pheromone overload. Sweating, I fight the urge to roll under the desk.

"Lilah," Atlas's bark jolts me, and I dart to him like he has me on a bungee. "Let's go. I'll take you to Hunter."

He leads me out, and I hate how I relax the second I'm absorbed into his orbit where his leather scent overpowers all the other noise in my nose. Just before the door swings closed, I glance back and catch Jett tracking us.

Tracking *me*.

He jerks his gaze away like he just got caught surfing porn. The kinky kind.

My feet stall instead of following Atlas.

I swear there's something so familiar about Jett. He has the straightest nose, a little flat at the tip, with sharp cheekbones, and a a sharper chin. I'm too far away to see his eyes, but I know they glitter like galaxies.

Only I've never looked into Jett's eyes, so I shouldn't know.

How do I know that?

"See something you like?" Atlas asks, knocking me back to reality.

“Sorry,” I quickly apologize and look at my feet.

“You recognize him.”

“What?”

“Jett. Do you remember him?”

Something stirs deep inside me, like worms at the bottom of a mud pit, but whatever memory’s lurking down there, it doesn’t bubble to the surface. “I don’t think so.”

He nods at my answer. “Come on. You shouldn’t be out in the halls.”

Atlas moves like he’s on a mission, but I swear he walks a little slower because I can actually keep up. He leads me to a huge gym filled with soft floor mats and paired alphas sparring hand-to-hand.

The nearest guy goes bug-eyed when he spots us. His partner isn’t quick enough to stop his jab and decks him in the face.

“Shit. Sorry, man,” he mutters before locking onto me in naked appraisal.

He’s big. Alpha. And I can’t tell if the stare’s about sex, violence, or pure curiosity.

I need him to look anywhere else.

Hunter guides two trainees in a slowed-down fight. He wears the same black camo as Atlas, marking them instructors or leaders, or whatever they are that makes me want to peel off every strip of cloth.

“Lilah?” Hunter turns to Atlas. “Why did you bring her *here*?”

I’ve been asking myself that same question.

Also, when can I *leave*?

The meeting’s over. We got the stupid ball invitation, and I have a mighty need for a dip in the ice-cold lake after spending the morning swimming in pheromones.

Whispers echo. The alphas’ scents mix with the strong tang of sweat. Their attention digs my flesh like needles. I want to duck and hide, but Atlas’s broad back doesn’t offer any shelter.

At least, not to me it doesn’t.

“Scorpio wanted her to sit in on classes,” Atlas answers. “Have a tour. Do some team bonding.”

“He wants an omega loose in the training center?”

“I’m not loose,” I mutter.

A trainee snickers.

Ignoring him, I step past Atlas, gravitating to Hunter, whose mezcal scent tastes disturbingly comforting when it should be anything but. “I’ll stay out of the way. Is there a corner where I can hide?”

“You’re not hiding.” Hunter sighs. “Full eval?” he asks Atlas.

“Grade her on hand to hand, then send her to Finn for marksmanship. We need to make sure she can handle herself.”

Wait. What? *“Train?”*

Also, I’m right here, assholes.

Atlas stalks off. I half turn to follow, but Hunter catches my sleeve. “You’re with me, Omega.”

“Why?” That’s what I don’t understand. I’ve taken self-defense and martial arts from dozens of different trainers, but combat for omegas is mostly about running away.

I’m all about the escape, especially today.

I have no business in a GD military school for the most elite of alphas. Especially because I don’t want them knowing how good I am. How much I love fighting. It’s the same as dance, the way I want to throw myself into motion, just to the rhythm of hard breaths instead of pounding bass.

“Did anyone say you could stop?” Hunter hits his trainees with a bark, and the stinking eavesdroppers jump back into action.

He pulls me to the edge of the gym, lowering his husky voice. “We’re stuck with the dads’ bullshit, which means you’re stuck with us and our enemies. You’re going to need to know how to fend off an attacker.”

The shiv in my waistband says I'm ready anytime, anywhere, but that's not a factoid Hunter needs. "Fine. What do you want me to do?"

"Switch pairs!" Hunter calls. "Brock, to me."

A smaller alpha jogs to our corner of the gym. Small being a foot taller with arms bigger than my waist.

"You're with Lilah," Hunter says.

His eyes bug. "Sir. She's an—"

"I noticed," Hunter says drily. "I need to evaluate her skills. Just do some basic movements."

"Yes, sir." He squares up to me, mouthing a soft *sorry.*

Me too, buddy.

Brock is lean and agile, already bouncing on his toes. That long reach is going to be a problem. He's so much taller. If he's any good at grappling, I'm screwed. But if I duck and—

Shit.

I catch myself just before Brock lunges. I don't need to beat him. I need to lose.

Instead of dodging his slow-ass right hook—he's totally taking it easy on me—I throw up a clumsy block and clench my teeth to take the hit. Brock's fist busts my cheek.

A flash of pain, and my head snaps back.

I crumple, eating mat hard.

"Lilah!" Hunter dives to my side.

"I'm so sorry." Brock hovers over me. "Sir. She was going to block, and __"

"Get out of here," Hunter barks.

"Right away, sir." Brock scampers off.

"Everyone dismissed!" Hunter yells. He waits for the alphas to clear the room. I peek from under my lashes, praying he punts me to the med bay or better yet, all the way back to the basement where I belong.

My jaw stings, but the hit's the kind that'll bruise hard and fade fast.

It's weird.

The hits that don't bruise, the ones that are the easiest to hide? Those are the ones that always hurt the most.

When the door slams, Hunter pins me with a scowl instead of the pity I wanted. "What the shit was that?"

"I think I have a concussion." I fake a wince, cradling my head.

"Bullshit."

My eyes pop open.

"You've trained." His gaze narrows. "Muay Thai? Boxing?"

"No."

He snorts.

"We do jazz aerobics at the Center."

"That wasn't dancercise, Killer. You were about to flip Brock on his ass. Why would you let him hit you?" He cups my chin, his palm so big and warm and safe—but his touch is lies.

All lies.

Hunter's the opposite of *safe*.

There's no deadlier danger than the way Hunter's head cocks to the side, the way he examines me like a puzzle he's determined to pull apart and twist into shape until all the broken pieces fit.

"I'm not a fighter," I say, straight-faced.

"That's not what your school records say."

"Those were omega tantrums. Not real fights. Didn't you see my combat marks?" I bet the trainers don't even remember my name.

Once I wised up, I only watched class, never joining in. Then I held my own battle practices after hours. In the gym, pounding the bag until my knuckles ached, or in the dark when two or ten jealous omegas cornered me in one of the campus dead zones, with no cameras to witness the beating whether I was the one giving or taking the hits.

“Really,” he says flatly.

I relax, and he reads the change in my body, stealing the chance to haul me to my feet. I thump against his chest, forehead bumping a wall of warm, firm muscle. I suck in a smoky mouthful, and my toes curl in my sneakers.

Hunter starts to purr.

The sound is soft as a rabbit fur brush, tickling the deepest part of my soul. I go *soft* for him. So soft my knees relax and I can’t help sinking deep into his arms.

“Lilah,” he rumbles, wrapping me in an illusion of safety so perfect I almost forget it’s fake. “You’re lying to me.”

I push off his chest and stumble back, clapping a sleeve over my nose so I can take a breath that isn’t all smoke and hypnotizing sweetness.

“You can fight.” His full lips pull into a smirk.

Hunter sees too much. Hunter *knows* too much.

“Just give me a zero. I promise, I—”

Hunter lunges.

Quick as a mofo viper, he jabs my chest, and I can’t do anything but react. I dodge, automatically blocking, pushing the force of his punch away from me and dancing out of his range.

His eyes light with interest. And with heat.

I shift my feet, losing the fighting stance, but it’s too late.

Hunter moves again. This time, I brace, locking down my reaction, determined to take another hit and prove that the last dodge was a fluke.

The shadow of his fist brushes my face, but he pulls the punch. Squinting through half-closed eyes, I find Hunter way too close, watching like he’s already sifting through my secrets.

“I can’t fight.” I scramble away from him.

“Sure, Killer. Come on. I’ll take you to Finn’s.” He reaches to take my hand.

“Lead the way.” I dodge again, wincing when he smirks.

“Have you shot before?” he asks, leading me out of the gym.

“A few times,” I answer, keeping close behind him while so many alpha eyes track us through the hall. I can’t decide if he’s better than Atlas or so much fucking worse when he angles himself to block me, subtly protecting me from their looks.

“A few times?” Hunter quirks a brow. “Let me guess. You’re secretly an ace assassin?”

My elbow cocks to nudge him in the ribs, but I hug it back to my body before it gets any ideas. Hunter and I aren’t on the level of teasing.

We are *not*.

He leads me down a quick flight of stairs to a series of ranges where the muffled sound of bullets popping off echoes down semi-soundproof corridors. We enter a room where every lane is taken and Finn stalks up and down the row of trainees, correcting postures.

He feels nothing like the mischief machine who ground up on me in a go-go cage. Nothing like the alpha who slung me over his shoulder, petted my thigh, and fed me french fries with firey looks.

Darkness clings to this Finn.

More than clings. It’s *inside* him, haunting everyone he nears. An alpha just as huge as him flinches when Finn steps into his space, eyes more black than green.

Killing aura.

It should be the latest reason to stay away from the man, but I couldn’t be less afraid of Finn. I’m fascinated, watching every lethal movement. Because Finn *is* deadly.

It’s in every lazy, precise action. A casual violence that has other alphas cowering from him like they know Finn could snap their necks, leave them in pieces on the floor, and no one would even try to stop him.

My traitorous nipples harden, popping up to say *hello dark Finn*.

Bad girls.

“Finn. New student for you,” Hunter calls when the gunshots finally lull.

“Babydoll.” Finn flashes a mouthful of teeth, bouncing over and breaking the spell. Thank god. This Finn I can work with, because unlike that dark, temptingly delicious demon he carries inside him, he’ll never take me seriously.

I’m a game to him.

Hunter pulls Finn aside to whisper something that has his eyes lighting up like grenades on Christmas morning. Meanwhile, the shooting never restarts. Curious alphas lower their weapons to watch me, sniffing the air and trying to catch my scent.

It’s not my first time at the range. Firearms are need-to-know self-defense when the omega kidnapping statistics read like a who’s who. It was easy to hide my shot-out targets when the instructors were so busy flirting with the real omegas.

It won’t be as easy to play the same trick here.

“Make room,” Finn barks, and the nearest alpha scampers out of his lane.

I jump to hide between the lane dividers, letting out a breath when I’m finally out of sight. But Finn is already too close. He smells more gunpowder than oranges today, a heady masculine scent I shouldn’t crave.

“Missed you, Babydoll.”

Like he doesn’t know exactly where I live? “What am I being evaluated on?”

“Have you shot before?”

I give the same answer that I gave Hunter, who I can feel hovering at the edge of the room. “A few times.”

“Good.” Finn licks his lips, but the mischief quickly fades as he walks me through the handgun I’ll be firing. I’ve never shot such a high caliber

before, but Finn explains it frontward and backward, checking to make sure I know what I'm doing before I'm even allowed to touch the thing.

It feels heavy in my hands. Not at all what I'm used to, which means maybe I don't have to fake missing the target.

"Show me what you're made of." Finn's breath feathers the hairs on my neck as he fits me with a pair of ear cups and drags a long, slender finger down the contour of my jaw.

A shiver rocks me. If he keeps that shit up, I definitely won't have to fake missing.

I move away from him, squaring up to shoot and planning to let the gun's kickback knock me on my ass.

Finn *tsks*. "Nice try, Babydoll."

His heat closing the gap between us, he lowers himself, flattening his chest against my back. Slinking his arms around mine, Finn rests his chin on my shoulder as he guides my hands, sending my heart into fluttering meltdown.

"You look so fucking good holding my gun."

There's nowhere to hide when the big bad alpha holds me captive in his arms.

If he were anyone else, I'd freak, but that deep, sneaky part of me recognizes Finn.

He's mine.

That batshit thought has me firing way wide of the man-shaped target I'm in no danger of hitting. The kickback rattles my teeth and knocks me deeper into Finn's arms. His rock-solid stance holds me steady.

"Try again," he mouths against my neck, stroking my hand with his thumb as he adjusts my aim.

I brace harder, then shoot. This time, the bullet hits the target's forehead, the force of the gun reverberating through my arms until my fingers tremble.

Finn hums in appreciation, and my nervous system crackles. *This is bad.* I wriggle out of his grasp, careful to keep the gun pointed away. “I can do it myself.”

“I know.” He nips my shoulder.

My shoulder!

His teeth graze my sensitive skin. I let out a half-whimper, half-mewl, my face blazing red, belly clenching so hard I’m afraid I just creamed myself.

Laughing softly, Finn finally lets me go.

I’m breathing too fast for a girl standing still. I want to unload on the target—just shoot again and again and again until the paper’s shredded, because just like this stupid attraction, Finn’s interest has to die.

I adjust my stance so I don’t ass-plant and start firing.

I land a few hits on the outer rings of the target’s head and chest so that it’s not totally obvious I’m throwing the game. The rest of my bullets fly wide, some punching the edges of the paper, some going rogue.

When I reload, Finn steps in.

“Keep your muscles tense. Arms here.” He shows me the position with gentle hands that have me popping goose bumps.

“I’ll try.” I don’t let myself loosen up until he steps aside.

After firing a few more rounds with no improvement, I glance at him. “How many more do I have to shoot?”

Hunter steps into the lane. “That’s enough for today. Atlas texted to meet him at the car.”

“I’m not done with her.” Finn’s jaw sets stubbornly, but Hunter tugs me away before he can do anything crazy. “End your class and catch up.”

Finn watches me leave, and so do twenty other alphas.

The hallway’s just as bad because the rumor mill must be churning. Now that people know who I am, they’re even more curious, staring at me, examining me.

I want to tuck myself against Hunter’s side and let him protect me the way I know he would if I asked.

But there’s no point.

He’s never going to be my mate, and soon enough, I’ll be fully on my own. Hunching into myself, I try to make myself smaller, with less surface area for the stares.

I can’t wait to get back to the nest and dive into the darkness where I belong.

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TWENTY-ONE

LILAH

ATLAS DRIVES IN SILENCE. I climbed into the back seat, as far from the alphas as possible, but their scents can't be escaped. Jett stayed at Wyvern House. The other three are three too many for my overworked ovaries, and I'm panting by the time we pull into the driveway.

As soon as the engine cuts, Orion pops into the garage. He tenses like a cat about to pounce when he spots me slinking out of Atlas's car.

"You're home early." He moves to Atlas, who kisses his forehead on his way into the house.

"We've got shit to plan." Hunter squeezes Orion into a hug. "We're on deck for the Patrick fundraiser."

"All six of us," Finn says. "*Together*."

Orion pales.

I hold back while the alphas pass him. I always feel weird in my skin when I'm faced with Orion, but now I'm puzzled too.

If Atlas, Finn, and Hunter were my alphas, and I was alone all day, I'd be all over them the second they came home. Full-on movie montage, sprint, pounce, thighs around their hips, kissing anyone or any part I could reach, and hopefully a quick orgy on the hood of the closest convertible.

Shit, I can barely stop myself now and I know they're not mine.

Orion looks likes he *needs* a hard knotting, itching his arms and leaning toward the house. He's holding himself back. Probably because I'm here.

I wince for him.

Omegas aren't built for restraint. We want what we want, and we want it thirty seconds ago.

Which is why I need to stop spending time moping over what I can't have.

"I'll leave." I move toward the garage door, ready to skirt around to the basement.

"You can come through the house." Orion runs a hand through soft, messy hair. "It's cold out."

"I don't mind."

"Lilah. It's fine. I can already smell them on you."

That is not fine.

My fingers drift to my waist, not that I *want to* stab Orion, but if he jumps me…

"Scorpio asked me to go to this ball, otherwise—"

"I know," he says with a hint of a growl that should send me running.

Omegas are always growling at me in challenge or hatred or fury.

But Orion's growl is magnetic. Like syrup-soaked apples and honey, melting me like chocolate in front of a cozy fire.

Color brightens his pale cheeks. He's beautiful, standing barefoot in sweatpants and a T-shirt that clings to his tight, lean body.

While I stare at him, he stares back at me, both of us wary, not sure who should make the first move.

I finally crack. "Honestly, I don't know what to do. I'm trying not to step on your toes."

The corner of his mouth quirks in the teeniest smirk. "You ever feel like you're a slave to the hormones?"

"Always," I say with a little too much passion.

He laughs, just a puff of air, flashing a breathtaking smile that lightens the day's heaviness and lifts an invisible barbell off my shoulders.

"Come through the house." Orion steps to the side, making space for me.

"Thanks." When I slink past, I can't resist the urge to breathe him in. Cider apple sticks to me, and the scent keeps teasing me when I'm alone downstairs, locked in the nest with heat pulsing between my legs at the thought of a pair of brilliant blue eyes.

I can't be attracted to him.

I won't let myself.

He's not even alpha, goddamnit.

I sneak into the empty gym and prepare to make Hunter's treadmill my bitch. Cranking the speed, I hit the belt, planning to pound miles until I collapse. At this point, I'm so dizzy with the pack's scents that it doesn't matter if the gym's soaked with their sweat.

My body has too many ideas that will get me in trouble. Like would it be so bad to lick the flavor from Orion's lips? Just once?

Not that I know anything about kissing. I bet Atlas could give me some killer tongue tips. *Maybe join us…*

I growl and duck my head, sprinting so hard my footsteps pound over the screaming belt of the treadmill.

I can't decide if I need a lobotomy or an alpha-girth vibrator.

I STAY out of everyone's way for the next few days, quietly working, exercising my pheromones to death, and avoiding all things alpha. I'm starting to hope that they've forgotten about me and this fundraising ball isn't going to happen.

I’m napping, totally passed out after a few hours in the lake, when I hear footsteps.

I snap awake, already holding the shiv under my pillow. The big heavy bank door is shut, but the fucking thing never locks, so I can never sleep deeper than a doze.

The footsteps stop.

Moving silently, I push the door open just wide enough to peek.

Please not Craig.

Please not any of them, but I hate the idea of Craig in my space the most.

It’s Jett.

In a suit, his hair slicked back to show off a profile like a billionaire CEO, he couldn’t look more out of place in the dingy basement. Yachts and runways are more Jett’s speed.

He jerks when he notices me peeking. Breathing through his mouth, he looks like he’s in pain.

“Here. Be ready at six.” He tosses the garment bag in his arms over a chair, and by the time I get to the table, he’s already taking halfway upstairs.

The gesture, the bag, the dark hair and eyes.

All the same as I remember.

The boy I made myself forget.

It was tea party weekend at the OCC, when the omegas’ families visit for a fancy day in the gardens. One back corner table was reserved for us Darlings, even though I was the only one who showed. A cucumber sandwich would’ve been my only meal that day. I was bruised and aching from a fight the night before and avoiding the dining hall. At the party, with parents watching, I thought I’d be able to scarf down a few mouthfuls in peace.

The trainers kicked me out, saying I didn’t meet the dress code in my scrufty sweatpants.

Hungry, tired, aching, I ran and hid, finding everywhere crowded, even the dorms. I ended up in the prop room behind the theater, nesting in a pile of silks and pillows from a performance of Arabian Nights.

I was sad and alone.

Until *he* found me.

He gave me a dress then, too.

He gave me a reason to smile.

“JJ?” The name slips from my lips.

Jett freezes on the top step, giving me nothing but his rigid back.

“Are you… JJ?” I can’t match the images of this demonically beautiful man and the sweet boy I used to dream about.

I forgot about him because I *needed* to forget or the hope would’ve crushed me.

Jett’s so taut that the air vibrates, every cell of him fixed on me, even though he never turns and never acknowledges me.

The door slams.

Shit.

He remembers.

I don’t like the idea of anyone knowing my real history instead of the careful persona I’ve cultivated since I got wise. Not that Jett knew the facts, but I can’t count how many times he found me beaten up, wallowing alone when there were no classes to throw myself into, and I had nothing to do but sulk.

I unzip the garment bag.

The fabric is the blue-grey of a storm cloud, deep and shimmering. It matches my eyes so exactly that it’s impossible to believe Jett hates me. Unless one of the others picked it out, but I’ve never seen one of them in anything but T-shirts or camo, and a tantalizing hint of cedar clings to the fabric.

My fingers tremble as I slide them over the soft, silky cloth. The bodice is embroidered with delicate pearls and glistening crystals. Jett picked out a gown for a princess.

Not for me.

As I pull it out of the bag, I'm positive it's exactly my size, maybe even tailored.

What do I do with that information?

I guess I thought I'd be going to this ball in sweats, the same way I go everywhere else since my clothing budget is zero dollars and my favorite place to shop is the lost and found bin.

The dress is sheer, small, and so heart-tearingly perfect, I can't imagine anything making me more uncomfortable.

There's nowhere to hide in a dress this gorgeous.

It freaking *sparkles*.

People will stare.

Alphas will see me in this thing.

I zip up the bag and hang it on the shower rod, hoping maybe it disappears. Jett picked that shit out like he has the password to my Pinterest vision board, and I can't stop seeing him side-by-side with the perfect, precious JJ of my memories.

Ever since the day he dried my tears and gave me a chocolate chip muffin, I was in love.

That was before I realized I can't afford to be soft.

I never spent much time around alphas, but JJ was the one who showed me they could be kind.

Back then, I still believed I could have love. I dreamed what it would be like if he were *mine*.

I just wanted to be around the beautiful boy whose rare smiles tipped my world upside-down, the only one who ever noticed my bruises or asked who gave them to me.

But he disappeared.

Just stopped coming to the OCC, or at least looking for me. Those were the saddest years. I had to accept the truth that I'll always be fighting.

That I'll always be alone.

No one bothers me the rest of the afternoon, but I run out of distractions as the clock ticks closer to the ball of doom.

Even sending invoices and watching the dollars drip into my accounts, there's no rush of victory.

I'm too nervous for tonight and what it means.

Because Jett recognizes me, and I recognize him. I'm starting to think that Wyvern Pack knows I was meant to be theirs. That the second my perfume hits, they'll realize I'm their meant-to-be mate.

But am I?

Orion has that spot locked.

So maybe I was supposed to be theirs, maybe I could've been, but not anymore.

I don't *want* to be theirs.

I don't want to be anyone's until I can try on what it's like to be myself, because all this time, I feel like I haven't met the real, actual Lilah. The girl I might've become if Mom hadn't thrown me away.

It helps to think of tonight as a play. A performance.

Getting into my role, I shower and slather myself with de-scenter. I have to be crazy careful to keep my secrets in a roomful of alphas. One hint of my perfume and I'll be as fucked as the Kama Sutra.

Slipping into the gown feels like putting on someone else's skin.

It's amazing and it's terrible.

I don't need to see the tag to know it's the most expensive thing I've ever worn. I sigh when I catch sight of myself in the mirror.

If I'm a princess, I look like one who's so far down the line, I'll only inherit the throne if a plague kills off the entire royal family.

I look like I've already survived a few plagues, with dark circles under my eyes and too-hollow cheeks and collarbones.

If I had makeup, I could hide every flaw.

Nope. Think again.

If I had makeup, I could *play up* every flaw.

I don't want to look well-rested or healthy or glowing. This stringy hair, malnourished waif vibe is exactly my jam, and I hope it repels every single alpha at the ball. I'm keeping my shoes on my feet and getting my ass out long before the clock strikes midnight.

Footsteps and voices sound while the pack gets ready for the night. I slip into the silver heels I stole from the club and tiptoe upstairs.

Hunter and Finn stand at the bottom of the grand staircase, and I should've done deep-breathing to prepare for seeing them in formal wear.

Fitted suits hug their bodies so tight the air abandons my lungs.

I want to yank their silk ties, haul them against me, and feel what it's like to be sandwiched while they drag their teeth up and down my neck.

One growl and I'll be *dripping*.

"Babydoll." Finn rakes me with a gaze so predatory I tip dangerously close to a hands-free orgasm. "You look like a snack."

I duck my head.

All I want to do is run downstairs, dive into my blankets, and hide the night away.

But it's play along or line up for my hormone shot.

It's just so hard to remind myself they don't want me when they look at me like *that*.

"Hurry up!" Hunter bellows up the stairs. "We've got to make a stop on the way." When he turns to me, offering a hand, his voice and scent are a low, smoky smolder that melts away my fears and sends me gliding into his arms like a fluffy little lamb.

“Let’s get you in your carriage, princess.” Hunter takes one of my hands, Finn takes the other, and when they both curl our fingers together, my heart coils in on itself.

How am I supposed to resist?

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TWENTY-TWO

LILAH

HUNTER AND FINN sit me between them in the back of a luxe limo while we wait for the others.

There's an inch between our thighs, but the alphas are basically on top of me. I shouldn't love it, but all I can think about is how to climb into both of their laps at once.

Between their body heat and their smoky, sweet, citrusy, mouth-watering scents, I'm in a toaster oven for pheromones.

I clench my legs tight enough to crush walnuts.

Finn watches every little twitch, his pupils dilating. When his hand creeps toward my knee, I know I won't be able to say stop.

I'll let him do whatever the fuck he wants to me, and if Hunter doesn't end it, I'll be begging him to join.

I'm so screwed.

Before I can invite them to my first-ever orgy, Atlas ducks into the limo in a cloud of leather and a presence so all-consuming, I only half-register Finn's touch brushing my leg.

Atlas notices.

"*Hands off,*" he barks.

The command turns my leg into a hot panhandle that Finn recoils from with a nasty snarl.

Orion climbs in like he's boarding the bus to prison, and Atlas is the big, beefy dude who owns his ass. Huddling close, they sit across from us.

Jett enters last, and my ovaries riot. His hair's clipped back with a few long pieces loose to frame the runway model jaw I want to trace with my tongue.

Every one of them looks *edible*.

Atlas is a mountain I ache to conquer and Orion's the younger blonder Bond, but Jett is pheromonal napalm. Cedar and saffron, he's this perfectly masculine, perfectly put-together package, and with the five of them all in an enclosed space, I give up on breathing through my nose.

Jett settles as far away from me as possible on the other side of the limo.

Thank fuck.

I can taste him in my throat.

"Everyone ready?" Craig pokes his head into the car. He's in a suit too, but the jacket's cut too baggy.

"Pull over at the mall on the way," Hunter says. "We need to make a stop."

"What stop?" Craig asks, leaning in like he wants to join the party.

"Pull over at the mall," Hunter adds a bite of alpha that has me shivering and clenching all over.

All. Over.

"Yes, Alpha." Craig flinches and shuts the door.

"How long do we have to keep that fucker around?" Hunter rubs his knuckles against his tailored pants.

"Not much longer," Atlas answers. "Why do you need to stop?"

"Makeup for our princess," Hunter says.

Orion jerks like he just took a silenced bullet to the chest. A fistful of Atlas's jacket is the only thing holding him back from my throat.

He's deadly silent, but the way he trembles may as well be a scream.

This isn't going to work.

I dive to the empty bank of seats and huddle in the corner. The new arrangement leaves Hunter and Finn, Atlas and Orion, and Jett each their own bench.

Orion's claw-hands relax, and he shoots me a grateful look. "Thank you."

I finally suck in a full breath, choking on Orion's bittersweet apple anxiety.

"What was that?" Atlas glances between us.

"Territory dispute." I fold my arms. "No pet names, especially in front of your omega."

"I didn't think…" Hunter rubs his thigh. "How are we supposed to deal tonight?"

"Are you sure you can do this?" Atlas wraps a possessive arm around Orion's shoulders.

When everyone's attention shifts to him, they miss my wince—the flinch I can't help at the invasive thought that I wish it was *me* in that spot.

Not in Orion's place.

Between them.

Under *both* their arms.

Fuck, I'm hopeless.

"I think…" Orion slips out of Atlas's grasp and crosses the limo. I hold my breath when he sits next to me, bracing myself for the blunt-force sweetness of his scent. "It's fine as long as I can take the lead. Let me escort her tonight." He tilts his head and his front curl bounces in a total tease. "Would you mind?"

My mouth drops open and he sneaks into my throat like sensual goddamned applesauce.

He tastes so *good*, as warm as a steaming cup of cider on a crisp fall morning. Sharpness gone, he relaxes into the seat next to me, stretching out his long legs like we're the best of friends.

History says this is when he stabs me, sells me out, or loses his omega shit and uses me as his punching bag. But instead of reaching for my shiv, I find myself wanting to lean into him. It's not trust, exactly, but something else, something deeper, a kind of understanding or resonance or vibe that I've never felt with another omega.

"Anything that gets us through the night." In a different life, I would've fallen for Orion harder than any of them.

Atlas watches like he's waiting for me to pull a machete on his mate. I keep my hands pressed flat to my thighs, praying he can't spot the shiv that fits so nicely in my bodice.

When I don't stage a coup in the backseat, his broad shoulders settle. "You'd better stick together. Easier to watch you both if you don't separate."

The car kicks into motion, and I try not to wiggle, too conscious of Orion sitting so close. The alphas can't look away, either because he's their mate or because the sight of two omegas sends their protective instincts into warp.

"What's the plan tonight?" Hunter asks, turning to Jett. "Threats?"

"No more than usual." Jett rattles off a list of guest names that the guys all recognize. "Mostly military and political packs. They'll all have their omegas in attendance, so security is tight. Your basic dinner, dance, and networking event in the name of charity."

Dancing?

My gaze slips to Finn, who's been watching me all the while.

His smirk spells all kinds of trouble. "Save me a waltz, Babydoll."

Orion goes rigid, nostrils flaring as he tries to keep his shit together. I don't know if they're trying to bait him or the whole idiot pack of them ditched their omega behavioral classes.

Damage control.

Orion grips his knee like a stuck gear shifter. Hesitantly, I press a fingertip to his hand, hoping touch—even my touch—grounds him. “I don’t have to dance. I’ll sit at the table and not talk to anyone if that makes you more comfortable.”

Wait, that’s a fantastic plan. Let’s do that.

I keep my eyes on Orion, trying to ignore the wall of growly, over-attentive muscle watching us like they paid for box seats. Orion’s pale skin is too hot, almost burning the pad of my finger. Instead of biting off my whole hand, he takes a breath, unclenches his death grip, and scoots a little closer on the seat. “I’ll be your dance partner. Question is, do we dance with outside alphas?”

“What?” My voice comes out sharp and panicked. “Is that a thing?”

“It might be tonight,” Hunter grumbles. “You’re unmarked.”

My hand slips to my bare neck.

Orion’s collar is low enough to show off the sliver scars of his mate marks.

My unbroken throat is an invitation with a mile-high spotlight and neon signs.

I squeeze my neck, hunching my shoulders at the idea of dancing with some rando alpha—anyone who isn’t one of these five. “I'm not dancing.”

And that is saying something because I love me some ballroom.

“We may not have a choice.” Atlas rubs his hands together. “We need to keep good relations with the other packs.”

“This is a business event,” Jett adds. “Everyone will be polite. Correct?” His gaze slides to Finn.

Finn shrugs. “I don’t want to dance with other packs’ omegas. I just want to dance with my babydoll.”

I tense, ready for Orion’s flinch, but he surprises me with a disgusted noise in his throat. “Don’t start shit, Finn. It’s already going to be a fucking night.”

“And can you not with the babydoll?” I can’t relax with Orion this close, but I’m at least comfortable enough to give Finn shit.

He grins. “I’ll think of an even better name.”

Orion scoffs. “Your nickname’s trouble.”

“Maybe Lilah likes a little trouble. Maybe she likes *big* trouble.”

I try not to shiver at the mischief in his voice, but I can’t fight the delicious rightness rolling through my body as the guys banter around me the way they would if I belonged.

Too soon, the car slows and comes to a stop in a shopping mall parking lot.

“Give me ten.” Hunter hops out.

Tension fills the limo when the door slams behind him. Hunter’s not the most dominant in the pack—that award goes to Atlas who draws my attention like a magnet every time we’re in the same space—but he is the most sane member, and without him, the pack’s problems jump out as boldly as the sexy freckles on the bridge of Finn’s nose.

Jett is in his own world, ignoring us all. Atlas stares at me and Orion like we’re a second from a blood-spilling brawl, and Finn’s too-sweet, too-angelic smile says he’s planning something fucking batshit.

It’s beyond weird that Orion and I—the ones who should be catfighting—are the most chill. Because as much as his scent stirs me up, giving my body ideas about how good that apple scent would mix with my carefully buried perfume, I’m very clear that we’re not in competition.

There is no competition, no matter how attracted I am to Orion’s mates.

They’re his and always will be.

The fact that I’m this hot for Orion is more proof that I’m an odd fucking duck. In all my classes, none of the trainers ever mentioned what to do when you want to lick another omega all the way down to his gooey center.

Hunter reappears carrying so many shopping bags that he must've charmed an army of beta salesgirls with his soul-seeing smile.

He offers the first bag to Orion, then ruffles his blond hair. "For you. You forgot to put this on."

Orion pulls out a box of pheromone-suppressing perfume.

"Oh shit." He rips off the plastic. "Good idea."

"And for you." Hunter hands me the bigger pile of bags, and it doesn't escape me that he knows exactly how to manage Orion, giving him attention before he even looks at me.

Curious, I open the first bag.

It's makeup.

Piles and piles of brand-name, expensive-as-hell product that I don't need and don't want to owe him for. "I can't. It's too—"

"It's a gift, Lilah." Hunter thumps the partition, signaling Craig to roll out.

I don't want to accept, but I can't toss the bag out the window.

Since there's no way to hide in this dress, I might as well paint myself a shield.

Digging through the bag, I realize how thorough Hunter is. There's a mirror, foundation that's a scary perfect match for my skin tone, palettes and palettes of shadows, and when I add up what it must have all cost, I want to puke.

"Speaking of going in prepared," Atlas says while I'm sorting boxes. "Are you armed tonight?"

I don't answer, assuming he's talking to the guys.

"Lilah?" Orion asks softly.

"Me?" I glance around. Finn's eyes glitter while the rest look on in various degrees of suspicion. I shrug. "I'm always armed."

Atlas scowls. "Give me your weapon."

"No." I clutch my bodice.

“You need something better than plastic,” Atlas says, shocking the hell out of me. “Finn.”

Finn barely twitches, and suddenly he’s holding two knives in each hand. I blink, trying to figure out where the fuck he just pulled them from, but the movement was too fast.

“You didn’t tell me you like knives.” He grins with all his teeth. “We’re going to have so much fun.”

Atlas plucks a slender blade from Finn and passes it to me. “You know how to use it?”

“More or less.” It feels heavier than I’m used to, but it fits perfectly in my palm.

“Get rid of that other shit,” Atlas insists.

There’s nowhere to hide, but I turn away from Orion, tilting my body toward the window before plucking the shiv from the front of my dress.

“Holy shit,” Orion laughs.

I try to tuck the new blade demurely down my gown, setting the shiv on my lap.

Orion grabs the shiv before I’m done, and when I turn to him, he’s examining the sharpened length of plastic with respect. “There’s dried blood on this.”

“I cleaned it.” But I’d used it enough times. Mostly as a deterrent. I’d go somewhere worse than prison if I ever killed one of the OCC’s precious omegas.

Finn snatches the shiv. “Mine now.” He picks at the dried blood and shoots me an affectionate smile.

Weirdo.

Atlas sighs. “Whatever happened to you before… That’s not going to happen again.” He fixes each of his pack mates with a stare. “You’re under our protection for as long as you’re with the pack. Understood?” Everyone nods, but it’s Orion he looks to for the final approval.

“Agreed.” Orion pats my knee. “We can coexist.”

I let out a breath from my soul.

The more they let me in, the more worried I am that I won’t be able to leave.

IT’S a pain in the ass doing makeup in a moving car, even one as smooth as this limo, but I’m in a full face by the time we reach the ball.

Craig smiles like a dog with a ham bone when Orion steps out. His lips curl when I follow at the omega’s side.

Or maybe he scowls because Orion offers me his hand.

My prince.

Fuck, I have to kill that thought, but Orion’s so perfect.

He’s only slightly shorter than the alphas, just the right height to be my escort. I try to clutch his sleeve more than his toned forearm, but when we cross from the limo into the posh manor housing the ball, I want to climb him like a kitten in a tree that not even a team of shirtless firemen could coax back to the ground.

The old-school mansion opens up to a grand foyer with two grander staircases and a chandelier with more bling than a mine for blood diamonds. It’s packed. Wall-to-wall alphas and a handful of omegas tightly protected in circles of bulky men.

The Wyvern alphas form a square with Orion and me in the center.

“Is this normal?” I ask, looking from guest to guest. Every other dude looks like secret service with football shoulders and a not-so-concealed carry.

“The Patricks’ donors are all high profile. See there?” Orion nudges me. “That’s Senator Patrick and his pack, with his omega—”

“Noelle.” My stomach deflates.

“You know her?” Atlas glances over his shoulder.

“*Yes*,” I answer in a sickly rasp. My ears buzz like a swarm of wasps is nesting in my throat.

I always thought karma would do its work on the evil bitch. But here she is, swilling a glass printed with her designer lipstick, giggling on the arm of a pack of politicians, and wearing a red, crystal-crusted gown that makes her look like a poisonous rose.

“She was the ringleader,” Jett offers without turning. “She put Lilah in the hospital.”

The guys’ heads whip to him, maybe wondering where the fuck he got that information.

Because how the fuck did he get that information?

I never named names. I never narked.

“It was that bad?” Orion casually rubs my hand where it rests on his arm.

I squirm, suddenly more focused on his touch than the slow reveal of all my sad, dark secrets. “I survived. And I doubt she remembers me.”

I hope she doesn’t remember me.

“You don’t have to greet the hosts. I’ll speak to them for the pack.” Atlas moves at the head of our formation, and the crowd parts in front of his overwhelming dominance. The beta servers dive out of his path the way you’d expect, but just as many alphas recoil as he leads us across the glittering ballroom.

“Table’s over there.” Hunter nods to a central table, where over-the-top orchid centerpieces decorate a white tablecloth set with sparkling crystal, and it’s all so gaudy, so wasteful, and so freaking beautiful that I know Noelle had a hand in planning.

She always loved to flash her cash.

Orion holds out my chair, and my stomach does a barrel roll. Everyone’s watching the Wyverns. Their attention sears my bare shoulders,

and I can feel them wondering who the hell I am to the most notorious pack in town.

Orion slips into the seat next to me, thin-lipped. “Everyone’s staring.”

“At you or me?”

“Both.” Finn drops onto my other side, sliding his chair close. “We have the hottest omegas.”

I shouldn’t let him in my bubble, but the scent of blood orange and gunpowder reassures me just as much as it does when he starts playing with his knives. Finn licks his lips, meeting our watchers stare for stare, and every alpha, beta, or omega who meets his eye flinches the fuck away.

Atlas sits next to Orion, and Jett and Hunter fill out our table, which thank the sweet lord, only has enough chairs for our six.

“Drinks?” Orion asks.

“Drinks.” I nod. Lots and lots of drinks.

“Be right back.” Hunter heads for the bar.

As soon as he disappears, an alpha steps into his place.

“Atlas,” the man rumbles, offering a bone-crushing handshake.

They trade greetings and news while I pretend I don’t notice the guy checking out my neck from the corner of his eye. I fiddle with my fancy cloth napkin, wondering if I should just tie it into a scarf.

When the first guy disappears, another takes his place, then another, and another, pack leader after pack leader, all wagging their tails to make an impression on Wyvern Pack.

I sink deeper and deeper in my chair until I hear a giggle like breaking glass.

“Lilah Darling? Is that you?”

I whirl, gripping my butter knife.

Noelle Patrick smiles a smile so toxic her scarlet lipstick should give off smoke. The red of her sleek gown sets off dark hair arranged with sparkling crystal hairpins, and if not for that subtle poisonous smirk, and the shine of

malice in her eye that everyone else mistakes as charm, you could believe she's the perfect pack princess.

Noelle has a Ken doll on her arm. Her pack leader's smile is so plastic, his hair so perfectly smooth, I'm already bracing for all kinds of bullshit about strippers, golf, and tax evasion.

"It's so wonderful to see you." Noelle's gaze drops to my neck, and I can *feel* her calculating. "Is this your new pack?"

Half of me wants to tuck and roll under the tablecloth, but I'll die before I show weakness to my childhood bully. "I'm their guest."

"You're the talk of the party." Noelle's alpha flashes me a political rally grin, offering his hand. "Senator Charles Patrick."

The arrogance of announcing yourself by your title fits the guy so perfectly. Before I can take the handshake that looks as welcoming as a dead pigeon, Finn intercepts.

"Charlie." He shakes like he's trying to dislocate the senator's shoulder.

"Mr. Finnegan. Ah. Nice to see you again." Charles steals back his hand a little too quickly.

"Senator." Atlas slides between me and our guests, and his broad back cuts off my view of them.

Did he just shield me?

I'm trembling, gripping the butter knife so tight its scallop-shell design embosses my palm. Scooting his chair closer, Orion gives my hand a sympathetic squeeze.

I almost drop the knife.

My brain can't do the math to calculate why the guys would protect me.

Like a predator who needs to keep me in her sights, Noelle glides around the table with her mate, putting them on the same side as Jett.

Atlas stands behind my chair. It should make me uncomfortable, but with his body heat at my back, and the subtle promise he's offering, I've never been able to face Noelle so calmly. It also helps that Orion hasn't let

go of my hand, and Finn watches her over three knives buried tip-first in the tablecloth.

Noelle clenches her mate's arm, but her viper red smile never slips. "What have you been up to all this time, Lilah? Goodness, it's been *ages*."

She says ages, but I remember every day, every corner I turned, and every closet I ducked in to stay out of her way. After Noelle and her drones kicked the shit out of me, I made sure she never spotted me again, keeping my ass hidden until the future senator and his politico-pack gave her the bite that finally removed the bitch from my life. Rachel's probably been giving her sad status updates that they've been laughing over for years.

"Same old," I answer. "Thanks for saying hi."

I hope she'll take a hint and disappear, but Noelle grins like a cat who sees a long tail in the grass. "Message me when you decide to go into rotation. I know so many lovely packs who'd love to have you for a heat."

I could snatch one of Finn's knives, vault the table, and slice her throat, but when I let myself play out the fantasy, I'd rather stab her somewhere less vital, ten or a hundred times with the blunt end of my butter knife.

Someone rumbles. Maybe it's me, but I can't look away from Noelle. We lock in a stare, and her pointed chin wobbles when I won't back down. She's used to me running and hiding, the first one to give in.

I'm not that girl anymore.

I don't bow. Not to *her*.

Orion breaks the moment, wrapping a protective arm around the back of my chair, his body heat leeching into my shoulder. "She's *ours*."

I bite back a whine.

Fuck, that sounds *goooood*.

"I don't see a mark." Charles traces the column of my neck with a gaze so squidgy, I want to turtle-retract my head into my ribcage.

"You want to see a mark?" Finn yanks a knife from the tabletop. "I can give you a mark of your very own, Charlie. Right in the throat."

Atlas rumbles, and I expect him to shut this down, to make me apologize. So I jump like a kitten when he sets a hand on my shoulder, wordlessly offering his protection.

There's this weird tingle in my toes.

Probably the first warning that I'm about to melt.

Then Jett unfolds from the table.

All I can see is his back, but Noelle and Charles go so stiff that the loose ends of his hair must've morphed into Medusa snakes. His voice rumbles out as cold as crypt marble. "If you'd like to discuss *business*, we can take this somewhere else. If you're here to fuck with our omega…"

He never finishes the sentence, and I forget how to breathe until Atlas gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Let's take our business into one of the private rooms. Finn. Stay with Lilah."

"Planning on it." Finn drives a knife into the table so hard the water glasses slosh, and Noelle scampers away, tugging her mate to flee.

Their retreat should be the sweetest sight I've ever seen, but I can't stop watching Atlas and Jett.

Our omega.

Why did he have to say it like that?

I know Jett doesn't mean it.

None of them do.

I can't let myself be tricked.

I can't let myself dream what it would be like if the Wyverns were my real pack. If I imagine being theirs, really, truly being theirs, I'll thaw, and there'll be no saving myself when I'm a puddle on the floor.

Orion finally takes back his arm. "Don't worry. The guys won't let her near you again."

With a sigh, I release the butter knife and rub my palm.

"Sorry. Got held up." Hunter appears, plunking down a few glasses of champagne. "Every asshole here is asking about Lilah."

“How many you think I’ll get to kill?” Finn asks fondly.

Hunter swats his shoulder. “Keep it in your pants.”

I gulp champagne and sneeze on the bubbles.

The way tonight’s going, Finn’s not the only one who’s gonna get stabbity.

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TWENTY-THREE

ORION

I'M hyper-focused on the one person I should be going out of my way to avoid.

I thought I'd murder Lilah when I saw her in that dress.

With that pale, pale skin, soft hair haloing her delicate face, and the blue-grey gown that makes her eyes look like storm clouds over a moonlit sea…

She's everything I can never be.

And every alpha here knows it. Mine included.

I would've clawed her face off if she weren't so perfect at handling me.

Finn keeps playing with his knives, trying to teach her tricks. When he pays her so much attention, my inner psycho flares. As soon as my fingers start to twitch, the vein throbbing in my temple, Lilah's on top of it like the fucking omega whisperer.

"Show Orion," she coddles him, leaning back in her chair so Finn has to include me in his love story to balisong blades.

She keeps checking in with me, pulling away from the touches Finn doesn't realize he's giving. A tap against her knee, brushing her long hair back when it falls over her shoulder.

Like he can't help himself, his eyes glowing this living, breathing green instead of the soulless black of his killing mood.

“For you, Omega.” A waiter sets a plate of bacon-wrapped shrimp in front of Lilah, and tension coils the back of my neck like a crazed spring already half snapped.

Even the waitstaff recognizes the pack’s *real* omega.

Lilah pushes the plate to me. “You have it. I hate shrimp.”

Just like that, I relax.

This woman could steal everything I have, everything I am, and she either doesn’t realize or doesn’t want it.

I can’t even hate her.

I hate how beautiful she is, how even before she put on the makeup that highlights her huge, soulful eyes, every one of my alphas was staring at her like a starving wolf.

I hate how Atlas’s attention slips to her. How Finn watches her with the dreamy happiness I’ve only seen him give his bikes. How Hunter can’t stop taking care of her, and how Jett’s determination *not* to look proves that he’s already lost.

She’s captured us all in her magic.

That’s why I notice she’s only picking at her dinner, giving the entrée a token nibble.

“Eat more.” I drop my roll onto her plate.

Lilah’s eyes widen like I just gifted her a diamond.

Never to be one-upped, Finn adds his bread to the pile. “You need energy for dancing.”

“I’m not dancing with other alphas.”

Satisfaction sends me humming when she chooses my roll first, slathering it with a thick coat of butter.

“Like we’re loaning you out to those fuckers. You’re *ours*.” Finn says it like she already wears his bite and he’s facing down a pack of alphas come to drag her away.

Like he’ll kill for her.

Like he'll *die* for her.

I brace myself for a wave of crazy omega rage, but it never comes.

"I'm already on loan," Lilah says, nibbling around my roll.

"Rent to own." Finn nods.

She scowls at him, and I feel my lips quirking.

Atlas finally reappears with Jett, drawing my attention back to my other side. Sometimes Atlas gives me nothing, other times I can read his face like our twenty-year history is a map of his moods. With a subtle chin jerk toward Lilah, he asks without asking.

Are you okay?

"It's all good." Even if I wish he *would* ask.

Atlas dips his head, nostrils flaring as he breathes in my scent. I let myself drink him in, all comforting leather and dizzying musk.

"Dance with me?" His voice drops to a low rumble that clenches my balls.

The music's just starting, the first few couples hitting the floor. I'm smug as fuck under the heat lamp of his attention. Everything's warmer when Atlas holds me in his gaze.

I offer my hand.

He takes it, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles.

I can't remember the last time he showed affection in public. I want to preen and wiggle and offer my ass, let him spread me out and take me on the dinner table.

I want everything Atlas will give me.

Everything.

Lilah inhales, the sound sharp and harsh.

Shit.

My perfume must be fucking ridiculous while I'm panting over our pack leader.

"Sorry, it's—" The words crumble, ash on my tongue.

Atlas growls, and this time, it's not a low, sexy rumble. It's a full-on, *back-the-fuck-up* warning that reverses my blood in my veins.

An alpha stalks to our table, murder in his hooded eyes.

His gaze drags over me like a zip tie, hard and restraining. Then he spots Lilah and his gangster smile pulls wide as a nightmare clown's.

Finn snarls and rears in his chair, shifting to block Lilah.

Thank fuck, my instincts don't swing territorial. My instincts want me still and silent.

Dominik Redfang.

There's no way Lilah knows who he is, but she senses the same evil that has me pressing into Atlas, needing his reassuring touch. Hunching low in her chair, Lilah grips her bodice over the spot that hides Finn's knife.

"How sweet." Dom stops in front of our table, steepling his fingers as he stares down at Lilah like a deranged CEO pondering his next takeover at gunpoint. "The Wyvern pack has a new addition just when mine is mourning its lost brother."

Atlas stands at my back, draping possessive hands over my shoulders.

I wonder if I should do the same to Lilah, but even with my pack leader behind me, I don't dare twitch in front of Dom. Lilah's on the same wavelength. Dead still, the shallow flare of her nostrils is the only sign she's not a pretty living doll.

My omega instincts scream. *Don't draw the predator's attention*.

"You weren't invited to this party," Atlas bites out the words.

"A friend gave me a call. Said the Wyvern pack showed up at the ball with a beautiful new omega. Unmarked." He watches Lilah through lowered eyes, thick with dark lashes that can't hide his predatory gaze.

She meets his stare.

Dominance rolls off him as he tries to press her to submit. Even with Atlas against my back, my knees tremble. Without him, I'm pretty sure I'd cave.

Lilah stands up to Dom like a tree in a storm, trembling but relentless.

His thin lips tilt, amusement, interest, and pure fucking madness dripping from every inch of him. He offers her a hand that may as well be a grenade. “May I have this dance?”

Deathly still, Finn stares at Dom with shadows whirling in his eyes.

Hunter growls. “You’ve got some fucking balls trying to take our—”

“She’s not yours,” Dom says crisply. “She’s fair game. Isn’t that right, Miss *Darling*?”

She flinches when he rolls his tongue over her name. I feel a rumble too soft to be Atlas.

The sound boils from somewhere so deep inside me, I didn’t know the spot existed.

“I don’t know how to dance.” Lilah dips her head as she presses back in her chair, trying to put distance between her and the devil’s hand.

“Even better. I love to lead.”

Finn lunges. Hunter grabs him, muscles cording in his neck as he tries to hold him back.

Maybe this time we should let Finn loose.

“We have an audience.” Jett sounds as cold as ever, but there’s fire in his eyes as he watches Dom creep closer and closer to our Lilah.

“Am I starting a war?” Dom asks. “All I want is a dance with this pretty thing.”

Lilah pushes out a breath, squaring her shoulders, and when she lifts her head, I see the determination in the press of her lips.

She’s going to accept.

She’s going to take one for the team when all we’ve done since we met her is act like crazy assholes.

Something cracks inside of me.

Lilah shouldn’t have to be so brave.

Even when I should hate her, when I should love watching Dom Redfang drag away the biggest threat to my life, all I want to do is apologize.

The words would only feel hollow.

The only thing I can do is give her my protection.

I lunge from my chair and shoulder Lilah out of the way to take Dom's hand. "I accept."

His flesh is cold as a snake's, his eyes just as reptilian, and his calculating smile may as well come with a forked tongue. "Orion Wyvern. What a pleasure."

He draws my hand to his arm, pulling me to the dancefloor. Panic and disgust writhe up and down my spine.

"No," Lilah protests. "I'll—"

One of my alphas shuts her up with a growl.

Knowing they're watching, knowing even a drug lord can't do shit to me in a venue this public, I let myself be taken to the floor.

Dom moves one hand to my shoulder and one to my waist. He doesn't touch skin, but I have the distinct feeling of snake scales slithering over my flesh as his eyes eat me up.

My hormones might keep me out of field missions, but I trained with the pack for years. If he tries shit, I can handle myself.

Even if I can't, *better me than Lilah.*

"You're as lovely as the rumors say." Dom bends into my space, taking a deep breath that makes me shudder. He smells like leather in his way, but cold and dry. Nothing like Atlas's warmth. It's the scent of a shedding snake, hiding in a hole, waiting for its chance to strike.

He's handsome if your type is cold, dark, and murderous, with black hair and a hint of madness in the emptiness of even blacker eyes.

It's not the cold feel of a sociopath. When Dom Redfang stares at your throat, you know he's *looking forward* to guzzling your blood.

I move like a robot as he leads us around the floor to the sound of music I can't hear.

"You're quiet tonight. I expected better conversation from the omega who charmed the Wyvern pack."

"Must be the company."

Dom's grip digs into my hip. "My brother used to compliment you. Now that I see the real thing, I understand why they're replacing you with that spitfire."

Am I that easy to read? I grit through a jaw rigid as rebar. "An addition. Not a replacement."

"She'd make a lovely addition to my own pack. Not that a piece of pussy can replace my brother, no matter how sweet."

That same strange growl rises inside me, fierce and protective. "Don't even think about—"

"I'm going to enjoy taking revenge from your flesh." He claws into my hip. "And from *hers*."

A soft, female voice cuts through Dom's threats. "May I have this dance?"

I turn to find the dancefloor still exists. Lilah stands with Atlas and a security team at her back, offering me a hand. Tearing away from Dom's clinging fingers, I pull her against my chest, letting her warmth, and the true neutral of her scent wash off the feeling of being squeezed by a boa.

She hugs my waist while shooting Dom the fiercest glare I've ever seen on an omega.

"We have to ask you to leave, sir," says the alpha in charge of security.

Dom lifts his hands. "Just having a talk with new friends."

"Get the fuck out," Atlas growls.

"See you soon, omegas." Dom smiles razor blades before sauntering off, looking like he's escorting security instead of the other way around.

“Stay together,” Atlas bites out. “Hunter’s watching. We’ll sweep to make sure Dom and his guys are all gone.”

“That guy gives me the fucking creeps,” Lilah says, starting to pull back.

“Dance?” I ask, not letting her slip too far away. Something settles inside me when I have her in my arms, looking up at me in concern instead of the hatred she owes me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She sniffs, testing my scent, which is probably a fucking wreck. “We can just sway at the edge of the floor.”

“I’ll feel better if we move.” I swing her into my arms. The music is some kind of uppity waltz. Most of the couples swirling are older pairs, alpha and omega.

But when Lilah moves against me, flowing like water to the music, I don’t feel mismatched. We fit like dovetails.

I’m not the greatest dancer. Scorpio made the guys and me take lessons in grooming us to take over the business, and I just memorized the steps so I wouldn’t get my ass kicked.

Lilah follows my lead so naturally, I feel like an old-timey movie star.

“You’re amazing,” I breathe, finally clearing my head of Dom’s scaly fucking nightmare scent.

“How did you learn ballroom?” Lilah asks, a satisfying ring of pleasure in her voice as she twirls like my old Hollywood costar.

“Too many lessons. These schmooze parties are par for the fucking course.” We mostly stopped making the rounds after my awakening. Now with Lilah in the mix, Scorpio’s finally setting us up to take over Wyvern House.

I thought I’d hate the added pressure, but with Lilah, nothing feels out of place. The always-there tension bleeds out of me, and instead of leaning back in the right ballroom posture, I lean into her. Lilah presses a soft cheek

to my neck, her ear tickling Atlas's mate mark in a melting kind of perfection.

Finn and Hunter watch from the edge of the floor, following our whirling path, and their coiled stillness says they're not looking because they want to keep us safe. They're looking because they're caught.

Because they can't turn away.

Maybe from Lilah. Maybe from the sight of us together.

My dick perks up.

The pack would get off so hard watching us together for real. Watching me peel off Lilah's dress in the pack bed and taste every inch of her.

A purr builds inside me.

Before I can figure out what it means, Lilah stiffens and my fantasy dies in a flare of knife-sharp panic.

"Down!" she screams, kicking my feet and slamming me to the ground.

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TWENTY-FOUR

LILAH

I SPOT the shooter half a breath before the first scream.

"Down!" Before I can think, I react, dragging Orion from the bullet aimed at his back.

The shot echoes in my ears, a world-ending snap that sounds ten times louder outside the firing range.

A line of fire cuts my arm.

Then it's fucking bedlam.

The room erupts.

A dozen shots pepper the ballroom, and I don't have to look to know the guy who just tried to assassinate Orion is meat paste. But are there more shooters? I keep low, looking for cover to duck behind, somewhere safe to drag Orion.

"Lilah. Your arm." He holds me against his chest where he caught me, his scent thin and sharp.

A wave of nausea rolls through when I spot the blood gushing from my bullet hole.

It's not a graze.

It goes *all the way through* my arm. I clap a hand over the hole. Hot blood flows between my fingers, spattering Orion's white collar, but I can't feel pain. *Yet*. "We need to get out of here."

“Hunter! Finn!” Orion shouts over the chaos.

The alphas barrel to us.

“Babydoll.” Finn plucks me off Orion, covering my bloody wound with a broad palm. When he lifts me into his arms, bridal-style, my legs are jelly.

Finn holds me to his rumbling chest. He and Hunter sandwich Orion between them. Together, they push through the crowd, snarling at anyone who comes too close to our tight group.

I relax in Finn’s hold. I should be on guard when another assassin could pop out from anywhere to finish what he started. Maybe blood loss is already settling in because I know the guys won’t let that happen.

I know they’ve got me.

They beeline to Jett, who stands in the foyer with a handgun cocked. His gaze snaps to my bloody arm, and his lips pull back, flashing teeth. “What happened?”

“He was aiming for Orion,” I say.

“So you took a bullet for him?” Jett snarls.

Why the hell is he mad at me?

“Pretty much.” I tuck myself tighter against Finn. As my adrenaline drains, my veins fill with pain. “Do we have to talk to the police or…?”

“Fuck the police.” Finn hugs me, covering my bullet hole with surprising gentleness. “Wyvern Clinic. Now.”

“Atlas is with Dom.” Jett falls into formation, all of them making a square around me. “Fucking bastard.”

“He’ll pay,” Hunter growls, promising murder.

If I were less light-headed, I’d be a lot more worried about the guys surrounding me like I belong to them.

Knowing how soon that’ll change, I close my eyes and listen to the calming thump of Finn’s heart.

THE THUMPING SOUND that lulled me to sleep bleeds into a beep. My face scrunches up as I'm pulled from a deep, deep dream.

"Lilah?" asks the honey-voiced prince.

I blink open heavy eyes to find Orion hovering over me, his golden hair glowing like a halo in the low light of a hospital room.

"What happened?" I start to sit, wincing when an IV wire pulls against my hand. I'm in a hospital gown instead of a ball gown, and I pray that nurses made the switch. I wriggle, lifting my blanket higher because it's freaking weird wearing a paper towel in front of Orion.

"The bullet passed through your arm," he says. "We called in the best plastic surgeon to stitch you up, so there won't even be a scar. The doctors…"

"What?" My heart lurches. The way he pales, I expect to look down and find a stump. My arm barely stings.

Why is he acting like I died?

"You had a lot of old injuries." Orion grips the bed rail until his knuckles whiten, looking anywhere but my eyes. "The doctors put you on a nutrient drip. They said you need it to heal. You already slept for twenty-four hours."

I hate the idea of him—or any of the Wyverns—seeing my bruises and scars. And still, Orion hasn't relaxed. He's coiled. Tense in a way that has my heartbeat shuddering like a swamped engine.

"What else?" I ask.

"They said it could affect your hormones. Maybe bring on your heat."

I suck in a breath.

No.

No, no, no.

"I sent the alphas away. You haven't perfumed."

"Why would you let them do that?" I'd rather be a shriveled husk, pitted, scarred, and weak than ever awaken.

“You saved me,” Orion’s voice catches.

“It was just a reflex.” I was facing the shooter. I saw him draw his weapon, pointed straight at Orion. There wasn’t time to think, but even if I had, I would’ve done the same.

“I owe you my life.”

“No.” I draw the blanket higher, wishing I could claw underneath and stay hidden in the dark forever. But the time to hide is over. I’m out. I’m exposed. And I have to start attacking. “We’re even. I’m the one who came into your pack.”

“Not because you wanted to,” he insists.

My mouth drops.

Orion’s defending *me*? “Did you hit your head?”

He laughs, high and sparkling. “The guys are outside. Are you okay if I call them in? They’ve been waiting to check on you.”

“If you’re okay with it.” Lifting the blanket over my nose, I give myself a sniff. All I smell is the plasticy, dry scent of hospital linens. No perfume, *thank fuck*.

When Orion hops up, I scan the room. With a couch near the big window and warm furnishings, the suite is nothing like TV, where someone slips into a coma and has to share their space with three psych patients and a team of neurotic doctors.

The accountant in me starts calculating how much it costs. The fresh flowers on my side table. The bag of IV fluid. Will the Wyverns ask me to pay it back? Or does it go on my OCC tab like all my other expenses?

I want to saliva vomit.

“Babydoll.” Finn rushes to my bedside, followed close by Hunter.

Atlas and Jett follow more sedately, with Orion trailing behind after shutting the door.

Hunter wrenches Finn back before he can dive on me, and the five of them surround my bed. They’re so big and tall it’s like being surrounded by

statues—only they're flesh and blood, and their pheromones flood with emotions.

Stress. Worry. Lust.

Lust?

I swallow, worming deeper under my blanket.

"Thank you." Atlas dips his head.

A weird, hazy feeling squirms inside me. The pack leader *cannot* submit to me. My blanket drops to my hips. "Don't. It's not—"

"We owe you," Atlas insists, hugging Orion against his side. "Losing him would destroy us."

They all dip their heads.

I'm fraying, caught under attention that pulls the cord on my heart and leaves me vibrating. I still feel the instinct to hide, but I've already been *seen*.

The deepest part of me has to admit we like their attention.

We want more of it.

Even if Orion is their special one.

I want them to be mine.

That's why I know what has to happen next. "I'll leave the pack. I can't be near you if the doctors screwed up my hormones."

If I awaken, I'll destroy them…and myself when they reject me.

"No," Atlas growls.

I whip to him, shocked that he's the one objecting, and even more shocked when Jett speaks up. "Dom has seen you with us, and he thinks you're ours. We have to keep you under our protection until he's neutralized."

Finn licks his lips. "Fucker put a hit on our omegas. I'm not neutralizing shit. Going to flay him the fuck open."

I shiver at the dark promise in his voice.

"You're stuck with us, Killer," Hunter says.

Clutching the blanket, the only thing keeping me grounded, I look to Orion. “You’re okay with this?”

Leaning against his pack leader, he looks cozy and safe, with a smug, masculine smile that shouldn’t make me quake. “You remember the part where you saved my life, right? I’m pretty sure that cleared up the territorial jealously bullshit. Besides. You never did anything wrong.”

“I…” My throat closes.

You never did anything wrong.

It’s just a phrase, but I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life to hear it. From Orion, it’s magic.

You never did anything wrong.

It soothes the years and years of being hated for existing. The beatings and scorn.

You never did anything wrong.

I crack, pulling the blanket over my face so they don’t see my eyes turning glassy with the tears I can barely choke back.

“Let us take responsibility for your safety,” Atlas says softly. “You can stay with us as long as you want, or until you awaken and find your real pack.”

My face twists.

My real pack.

Shit.

One whiff of my perfume is all it’ll take to break our truce. Who cares about a scent match when Orion’s already bitten, already theirs? They’ll have to send me packing, send me far, far away from their real omega, who won’t give a shit that I saved him when my scent hits his mates like cocaine.

Maybe I can’t have them as mine, but if I can stay with them, it’ll be enough.

As long as I don’t awaken.

I can *never, ever* let them know if I awaken.

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TWENTY-FIVE

LILAH

BY THE TIME the doctors say I'm healed enough to go, it's just me, Orion, and Hunter at the clinic.

They leave the suite while I change into the new clothes that someone bought me. There's a pair of perfectly fitted jeans and a big, baggy, orgasmically comfortable Wyvern House hoodie that's drenched in Atlas.

I bury my nose in the fabric. His scent is leather but not leather, something warmer and more lickable, like sex on the comfiest, coziest cloud. I want to rub myself down with him so that everyone knows *exactly* who I belong to.

That's when I catch a hint of something else.

Caramel.

Burnt sugar and vanilla.

Like crème brûlée, freshly torched, with a scoop of ice cream melting on the side.

My scent.

My pheromones.

My perfume.

I think I'm going to throw up.

I strip off, dive into the shower, turn the water to scalding. Then I scrub myself red with de-scenting body wash, thankful as fuck that Wyvern Clinic

is so bougie.

I scrub and scrub and scrub.

The water soaks my arm bandage and I'm pretty sure the nurses are going to ream me because it stings and it'll probably get infected.

Bring on the sepsis.

Blood rot would hide my perfume.

When I'm clean enough to ace a sniff test, I towel off and grab the de-scenting lotion. I need more. Hair products. Pads. I need to cover every base.

The suite is stocked with everything. I ransack the cabinets and jam as much as I can hide into my bag.

"Lilah?" Orion knocks. "Are you ready? The doctor wants to talk before you get your discharge papers."

"Just a second!" *And speaking of discharge…*

I shove a pad into my lacy new panties. If my perfume's coming in, my body's going to start with all the omega tricks.

My slick is a death sentence if one of the alphas catches a whiff—let alone Orion.

You saved my life won't pull as much weight when my arousal slaps him in the face and hormones have me throwing myself at his mates, begging them to knot me.

Smoothing my hoodie with shaking hands, I try to breathe. Everything has changed, but nothing is different.

I need about three hours of laps in ice-cold lake water, followed by a marathon of treadmill and boxing. I'm too rested and hydrated after sleeping and being pumped full of IV fluids. I need to drain this energy to get back to normal. I need to wear myself out until I puke.

"Ready," I call when I'm positive I'm scent-free.

Orion and Hunter enter, followed by a clean-cut beta doctor.

Hunter frowns at the wet hair soaking my hoodie. “You got your bandage wet?”

Shit. He sees too much, too quickly.

“I needed a shower.”

“You have to take better care of yourself, Miss Darling.” The doctor calls for a nurse to change my bandages, and his eyes pinch as he works himself into a lecture. “With your history of injuries, you need to make health and nutrition a priority if you’re ever going to resolve your late awakening and hit fertility.”

Right. Because my main concern after a gunshot wound should be opening the gates to my baby factory. “I hate children.”

The guy gapes like a koi fish. “That’s… Excuse me, I thought…”

Hunter rolls his eyes. “We’ll take good care of her.”

“Yes. Of course.” The doctor recovers from the fluster, and spouts a bunch of ultrabasic omega healthcare info that I could rattle off backward in Mandarin.

I know how my body works.

When I’m set with dry bandages, Orion and Hunter walk me down the stairs, and I try not to preen at how much I like being between them.

I can’t help sneaking peeks. Orion is every inch the prince, soft curls glittering in the sun, the perfect contrast to Hunter’s dark, knowing, action-figure vibe.

“Careful,” Hunter says, tugging me away from the umbrella stand I almost ate.

He sees *everything*, and I like him seeing me, watching over me.

I seriously have to get my shit together.

Whatever dopey smile I’m wearing dies when I spot the Jeep on the curb. Craig jumps up like their left-behind hound.

“Alpha. Omega.” He licks his lips, leaning a little too close to Orion, who draws back from him until his shoulder bumps mine.

It’s super clear that his simpering *omega* is for Orion and Orion only. Craig quirks a sneer when his gaze passes over me like I’m the trash bag they’re hauling into his ride.

It’ll be a goddamned miracle if I don’t stab this guy.

“Straight to the house,” Hunter says, helping me into the backseat.

“Yes, Alpha.” Craig hops to obey, opening the passenger door with a puppy dog look, and his cardboard scent swells with hope.

Orion shakes his head. “I’ll sit with Lilah.”

The back of my neck starts to sweat as the guys settle me in between them. The middle seat gives the perfect view of the rearview mirror and the glares that Craig keeps shooting.

Looks, I can handle. I’m worried what happens if his resentment turns to something more.

But it’s kind of hard to focus on the kicked-dog beta when I’m the meat in this hearty man sandwich. The backseat is all apples and honey and smoke, and I can’t tell if my perfume’s sneaking in the mix. I grip my thighs, trying to keep my hands to myself.

“You sure you’re not hurting?” Hunter asks. “We can call in a prescription for more pain meds.”

“I’ve had worse.” The bullet went clean through my arm. Yeah, it aches, but it’s professionally stitched and sanitized. Much better than all those times omegas clawed me to shit and I had to disinfect with hand sanitizer, fearing the nasty germs they had crawling under their nails.

Hunter rumbles. “We’re going to take care of you, Killer.”

“For real this time.” Instead of reacting to the nickname, Orion hesitantly touches my knee.

His touch is kerosene. The applesauce scent of him sucks down my windpipe, strokes down to my core, and settles in to stay. I squeeze my thighs against the sudden betraying wetness sparked by his attention.

His *care*.

Thank fuck for scent-neutralizing pads.

I can hardly breathe on the ride home. Hunter keeps asking me what I need and Orion drifts closer and closer, a brush of my shoulder, a bump of my thigh, and a soft, soothing purr that makes me want to squeeze him like my own personal body pillow.

When we finally park in the garage, Hunter offers me a hand down and doesn't let go, leading me into the house.

"She can't go that way." Craig hops out in a snit. "She has to go around."

"She can." Orion takes my other arm.

"Do you want a room upstairs?" Hunter frowns. "The basement's kind of…"

"I like it." Because if I have to try to rest knowing these guys are just down the hall, I'll cream myself in my sleep.

Every night.

"Come in." Orion tugs my elbow. "Let me give you the tour of our McMansion."

"You're giving her free reign?" Craig chokes out. "But the pack—"

"*Craig,*" Hunter barks. "We need to talk. You two, go ahead."

Orion pulls me into the house, and both our shoulders drop when the door cuts off the resentful cardboard scent.

"Why do you keep him around?" I ask the question that's been bugging me since day one.

Now that I understand their pack vibe, I don't get how Craig fits.

"He was our driver. Scorpio and the dads insisted we needed a beta for balance. It was easier to invite him as an assistant and say we were considering it than interviewing candidates we didn't want."

"So you're stuck with him?" It boggles. Apparently, I'm not that special. The four founders love shoehorning members into their sons' pack.

“Not forever. Just until Scorpio eases back.” Orion leads me down the hallway, but I can’t focus on the expensive bachelor pad decor.

“Will he ever? I mean, Exhibit A.” I wave at myself. “At some point, you’re the omega. It should be your decision who’s in or out.”

“Yes and no.” He huffs a breath, dropping the elbow that he was holding. *Landmine.* “It’s not that simple.”

But it should be that simple.

Both with Craig and with me.

Why is Orion tolerating us?

His word should be law. That’s what I was taught. As long as you have a reputable pack—not some mafia, underground, slavery nightmare—the omega is king or queen of the roost.

But with Orion pulling back from me, I keep it light. “Craig sucks at grocery shopping.”

Orion snorts, tension easing. “Yeah. I mean, I love sour cream and onion, but chips and dips? Not a food group. And downstairs is always in shambles.”

“You don’t have a cleaning staff?” I ask as Orion leads me past the kitchen, into a huge sunken living room filled with masculine leather sofas that reek like the pack and have me twitching to launch myself into the scattered cushions.

“I hate having anyone in the house.”

I wince. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine now.” He shows me the remotes and how to work the TV. “This is where we hang when everyone’s home, which these days is never.”

“You’re always alone?”

“Just me and my buddy Craig.” He jams the remote back into its charger cradle. “I’m banned from HQ until my perfume’s under control.”

Biting my lip, I can’t help giving him a sniff. I’ve grown up around so many crazed omegas, I have a good sense of where they are in their cycles.

There’s this sharp, needy undertone that makes me sneeze when one’s edging to their heat.

It’s harder to tell with Orion because I’ve never met an omega who smells so fucking delicious, but if I push past the yummy, *coat-me-in-that-shit* apple amazingness, there’s a subtle sharpness that makes my nose itch. “When was your last heat?”

“Ten months ago.”

I suck in a breath. “That’s too long.”

“Tell me about it.” He ruffles his hair, rucking up the curls.

Males should cycle through their heat every three to six months, at most. Orion’s coming up on a full year.

As the world champion of avoiding heats, I’m also pretty fucking epic at diagnosing them. “How many hours of omega classes have you taken?”

“Two,” he says with a bashful rub of his neck.

Two!

With all the hormone shit we have to deal with, that’s not even an intro to omega lore.

Orion needs my help.

But does he want it?

“Could I maybe give you some advice? I swear I’m not poaching your territory. Just, I know all the omega stuff, and I know what it’s like, and—”

“Lilah.” Orion reaches in, silencing me by softly cupping my cheek. “I’ll take any help you can give. I’ve been going insane.”

“I’ll help,” I say before I can question why I’m volunteering myself for more trouble.

His touch melts my brain.

Orion shows me the rest of the ground floor. There’s a conservatory with a grand piano that gives me flashbacks of music lesson hell, and a huge bar that connects to the living room and patio where I can picture basking in the warm sun while the alphas rub me down in oil.

I’m swaying on my feet by the time we hit the stairway.

“Go rest. I’ll show you the upstairs later.” Orion escorts me back to the basement. “You sure you don’t need anything?”

“I have everything I need.” I give an awkward little wave and duck downstairs. When I shut the door behind me, I take a huge, shuddering breath.

The more I get to know the guys, the more scared I am.

Because what happens to me when I have to let them go?

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TWENTY-SIX

LILAH

IF BY "REST" Orion meant I should spend two hours hitting the treadmill on its highest incline, then I'm *so* refreshed.

The supply closet has zippy bags so I can stash my used pads until I find a way to burn them without setting off the smoke alarm.

After a shower and another change of bandages for the bullet wound that's weeping, I flick on my tablet and hit the digital pavement. Curled up in my loaner nest, I balance spreadsheets until my eyes ache and I have to double-count the numbers to stop making stupid mistakes.

"Lilah?" Orion calls from way too close.

I drop the tablet into my lap, clutching my blanket tighter. "Orion?"

He swings open the heavy door but doesn't cross into my space. "Would it freak you out if I came in?"

I take a second, waiting to feel the kind of hair-raising, gonna-stab-you-in-the-jugular rage that I felt every time some bitch snuck into my dorm room to mess with my shit, but nothing boils to the surface.

That doesn't mean I'm still water.

The feeling bubbling up is more nervous excitement, a light, happy dance of electricity.

I *want* Orion in my space.

Damn it. I clench my legs, hoping I slathered on enough de-scenter.

“I don’t mind,” I answer, a smidge too breathy.

Orion crosses the threshold, both of us holding our breaths. When his nostrils flare and he doesn’t react to my scent or the fact that I’m occupying his basement, my shoulders finally drop.

“How are you not uncomfortable living down here?”

I shrug. “I’ve never had this much space to myself before.” The nest and kitchen are a palace compared to my dorm room. “It doesn’t bother you to be here?”

“I thought it would. Guess not.” He sits on the edge of the bed, but the mattress is so freaking huge we have our own zip codes. “Did you get some rest?”

“Yeah,” I lie. “So much rest.” I haven’t closed my eyes, afraid I’ll perfume in my sleep.

“I was thinking of cooking dinner, but then I remembered the only thing I can make is tomato soup.”

I laugh. “The OCC made me take culinary classes. I’m surprised the pack never sent you.” Older omegas were always popping in for day classes.

He scuffs his feet over the old carpet. “My blood tests said I was alpha. When I awakened omega and the pack chose me anyway, we were so caught up fighting the dads, classes didn’t seem important.”

“Why do they have a problem?” I wrinkle my fingers in the sheets. “Aren’t you guys a best-case scenario? Awakening to form a pack with your best friends?” It sounds way better than all the awkward courting rituals OCC omegas are forced into. You don’t get to know what a pack’s about from a few ice cream socials and tea parties.

“We’re not a scent match,” he confesses.

I hide my wince and pray he can’t sense the guilt that feels like lead pellets in my belly. “That shouldn’t matter. They care about you.”

“Do they?” he asks bitterly.

“Of course they—”

“Then why are they never here? Why do they avoid touching me? Why —” His rising voice chokes off and his pheromones sharpen like crab apples, bitter in my throat.

“Hey. It’s okay.” I crawl to him, something inside me needing to respond, needing to help him.

Steeling myself for him to throw off my touch, I smooth up and down his spine. He’s hot, vibrating like a leaf in a whirlwind.

“You’re okay.” I pat his shaking back, moving my other hand to his shoulder. “That’s your hormones talking.”

When he takes a deep, hitched breath, and turns wide, vulnerable, blue eyes to me, I flinch away like I’ve been burned.

The moment drags.

He stares at me. I stare at him, mouth opening and closing.

What do I say?

What do I call this—whatever it is between us?

I’ve never met an omega like Orion.

His pain hurts me, and his scent revs me just as quickly as his alphas’. When his eyelids droop, and he looks up at me from underneath thick golden lashes, I swear he’s attracted to me too.

But something keeps us from moving, from closing the space between our too-warm bodies, and seeing what the fuck is going on.

I’m too big a threat to his position, and too much of me wants, needs, *craves* his alphas.

And maybe I want Orion, maybe I want him just as much as I want them, but truth is, he’s stealing *my* alphas too.

I slink away, crushing the moment. “Dinner? You’ll feel better if you eat.”

“Yeah.” Orion rubs his shoulder. “Dinner.”

We head to the kitchen, and he texts while I grab ingredients from the fridge that someone finally excavated. The food is fresh, all the old takeout containers sent to dumpster graves.

“Burgers?” I pull out the ground beef.

“Can we make enough for everyone? The guys are on their way.” He looks at his screen instead of me.

I try not to let it bother me. “Sure. There’s plenty.”

I rummage around the kitchen, trying to find the right bowls and spices while Orion ignores me.

After a while, he tucks his phone into his pocket. “What can I do to help?”

“Chop the lettuce and tomato? And find a cutting board? Because I don’t see one.”

“Up here.” Without even lifting onto his toes, he easily grabs a board from the stash of pans in the cupboard above the fridge. “We need to get you a stepladder. Or a *ladder* ladder.”

My jaw drops. “Are you calling me short?”

“You fit in my pocket.”

Orion’s pockets don’t need to be on my brain, because then I’ll want to reach in and check what he’s hiding in those jeans.

While he starts cutting vegetables, I slow down, stuck in omega dick fantasyland. He’s super tall, so I can’t help wondering if he’s proportionate.

I wonder what the other pack members do to him in the madness of his heat.

I wonder if they’d let me watch?

A throat clears.

Orion and I whip to the entryway.

Craig strolls into the kitchen with a plastered smile for Orion.

“Omega. You shouldn’t be doing housework.”

“I’m cutting tomatoes. Not re-grouting the tile.”

“Let me do it for you.” The beta makes a grab for Orion’s kitchen knife.

“I’ve got it.” Orion dodges before Craig can touch him. He moves closer to me, half-hiding me behind his back.

My stomach warms.

He’s protecting me.

“Why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be picking up the guys?” Orion’s grip tightens on the knife handle. He’s taller than Craig, but the beta’s stockier.

Somehow, I know Orion could kick his ass in a fight.

But with some fights, starting them means you’ve already lost. My fingers drift to the switchblade tucked at my hip.

“They told me not to bother. I just want to help you.” His moon eyes make me twitch.

“You’re not on the clock. Go home.”

I’m gripping Orion’s sleeve before I realize, and Craig scowls when he tracks the motion. “*She* gets to stay.”

I open my mouth ready to defend myself to this *creeper*, but Orion takes a step, blocking me from his insanity.

“Her name is Lilah, and she saved my fucking life. If you can’t be polite to her, then you can get the fuck out of my home.”

“It’s not like that, Omega,” Craig whines.

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Orion says, exasperated.

“First thing in the morning. Good night, Omega.” He sulks out of the kitchen like a stepped-on rat.

Orion sets down his knife with a shudder. “That dude has got to go.”

“Like, now.” I mean, I’ve grown up with a mess of textbook hanger-oners but I’ve never seen one so unable to read the room. The pack’s not even nice to Craig and he’s *begging* for their affection.

It’s a sour thought because am I any better?

We let out big twin breaths when Craig’s car rumbles down the driveway. Then we trade looks and laugh.

I rub my hands on my jeans. “I’ll finish the burgers. Do you like sweet potatoes?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Root veg is good for us. Plus they make killer fries and you have a fridge full of sauces I want to try.”

“The kranch will change your life.”

“Kranch?”

“Ketchup ranch. You’ve never had it?”

Ketchup! AND ranch!

What genius came up with that? And why have I never seen it before?

“Do you like spicy?”

“Love it.” Whenever I could do the dining hall without getting jumped, I slathered my tray in Tabasco, chili flakes, and cajun spice.

My palate is wrecked and I’m not mad about it.

“You have to try the Thai chili sauce.” Orion rubs his hands together like a mad scientist. “All the guys are meat and potatoes pussies. Hunter accidentally ate my hot Cheetos once and wouldn’t stop whining for weeks. Try this.” He makes me a rice cracker dipped in red sauce that’s polka-dotted with chili flakes.

I pop it into my mouth. “It’s not that—oh, shit!” I choke when the spice hits me, but swallow it down with a smile as whatever it is gives my lips that sweet tingle. “That’s so good.”

“Right? This one next.” He hands me bite after bite while we dance around the kitchen, finishing dinner together.

I’m laughing while Orion feeds me when I realize I’ve crossed into the Twilight Zone.

Because this can’t be real.

And if it is, it sure as fuck can’t last.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

ATLAS

WE'RE ALREADY HOME when I realize we forgot to grab takeout. It's been a goddamned *day* tracking down dead-end leads on Dominik. We're no closer to finding where he goes to ground after he slithered away from security at the ball.

Now we're stuck waiting for him to make his next move.

My gears have been spinning as I watch and re-watch the CCTV video.

That bullet came a millimeter from ending Orion.

If Lilah wasn't there…

Bile rises in my throat.

Orion would be dead. No question. We'd be planning a funeral instead of revenge.

But Lilah pulled him out of the way. Saved him. Saved *us*.

Now she's hurt and she's my responsibility.

But like the asshole I am, I didn't even fucking think to bring her dinner.

Or Orion.

Feeding your omega is this primal thing, the most basic, most satisfying desire. Yet here I am, forgetting him.

Forgetting *them*.

"Pizza?" Hunter asks as we climb out of the car.

"I want the cup pepperonis," Finn says. "Not that pineapple bullshit."

Jett snorts. “Hawaiian too sophisticated for you?”

“I’ll call—” My voice dies at the smell wafting from the house. I swallow.

“Babydoll?” Finn barrels for the kitchen. “You cooked for us?”

I follow, the other guys close behind.

The sight knocks out my breath.

Orion and Lilah wear matching aprons, huddling shoulder-to-biteable-shoulder at the island, their lips swollen and suckable.

From kissing?

From fucking?

My dick presses my fly like I’m gonna whip it out right here, and I damn near black out.

Orion bending Lilah over the counter, grabbing a fistful of her long, luscious hair as he pounds into her dripping cunt from behind.

Orion sandwiched between us.

His hot, soft body at my mercy as I rail him into her pussy, controlling two sets of moans. Two sweet scents stroking me into an orgasm so mind-blowing, so intense, I don’t know if I’d fucking *survive*.

Hunter elbows me, lifting a brow sky-high.

Fuck.

Between my raging scent and the growing knot about to bend my zipper, I’m confessing all my forbidden fantasies.

I breathe through clenched teeth.

Orion has his goddamned hot sauces spread all over the counter. A smudge of red hangs at the corner of Lilah’s lickable lips.

The look is sexy as fuck, but the idea of them eating that garbage sends me rumbling. “You’re feeding her *that*?”

“I like spicy.” Lilah licks her fingers, and every one of my pack brothers —even Orion—stares like that sweet little fingertip is circling her clit.

We need to get laid.

And not by Lilah.

She doesn't notice us panting, whirling to the stove where rows of burger patties are browning on a grill pan. "Are you hungry? We just threw these on."

"I could use a snack." Finn darts in, trying to nip at her, but she dodges so fast I'm not the only one suspicious how much she's trained.

She swats Finn with a potholder, and the asshole grins like he just got tongue kissed.

"Help me put these together?" she asks Orion, not realizing how sweet she sounds when she isn't trying to shove us away.

The four of us lean on the island as the omegas work. She plops a butter-toasted bun on each plate, Orion adds the toppings, then she flips the burger from the pan. He puts the top on the burger, walks his cute ass to set it at the table, and then they move on to the next plate like they've been cooking together for *years*.

A few days ago, Orion was fantasizing about ripping out Lilah's throat. I was scouting for a soft spot in the garden to bury her body.

"Kranch?" Lilah asks hopefully.

Orion grins like he's giving her a diamond ring when he hands over the bottle. "You're gonna get addicted."

Lilah pulls a pan of homemade fries from the oven, grabs one piping hot, and dips it in the pink sauce. Covering her mouth, she breathes in little pants, blowing out air when the thing burns her mouth.

A rumble builds inside me.

"Easy, Killer." Hunter moves in faster than I can react, offering her a napkin.

I stand and stare, watching the surreal, oddly perfect moment, as she dabs her chin, eyes glittering. Jett and Finn are just as mesmerized.

"It's amazing." She flashes Orion a shooting-star smile that cuts through my defenses and craters somewhere in my chest cavity.

She has a beautiful smile. Pink lips, plump and perfect.

My gaze snaps back to Orion, praying he doesn't flip because his pack leader's drooling over someone else. But Orion's not seeing me at all, busy watching the fun-sized omega scooping sweet potato fries.

I wait for my instincts to blow up in a jealous geyser, but there's no heat, no steam.

I've never seen Orion give a shit about a single person outside our pack.

He's rigid around outsiders. Guarded.

Lilah's different.

"I'll take my dinner downstairs." She grabs the plate with the least amount of food. *Not enough.*

The pack turns to me.

Orion tips his chin toward the table we haven't used in months. We always eat standing, always rushing off to the next mission, the next training, the next duty.

We could use a night to relax.

"Sit with us." I grab two plates and set them at the head and side of the table where Orion and I would usually sit.

Tugging Lilah's sleeve, Orion guides her to her seat. He drops an armful of sauces in front of them both and sits close beside her.

Finn snags the other seat next to Lilah, leaving Jett and Hunter to fill in the sides. I find myself facing her, watching her devour her meal.

"Try the spicy honey mustard," Orion says in a coaxing tone that makes me want to haul him onto my lap and keep him there 'til he's writhing. He squirts a blob of sauce onto her plate, all sunshine and smiles that none of us can resist. Even Jett's expression thaws.

Lilah casts her eyes down, sucking her lower lip between her teeth, but when she bites into another fry, she can't hide her truth.

"So good," she moans, the sound so fucking erotic, she should be bouncing on a cock. *Preferably mine.*

I shift in my chair, and fuck, I'm not the only one.

Finn devours her with dark intensity. Hunter's gaze flicks back and forth over us all, drinking in our tiniest reactions, and Jett grips his knife and fork, twitching at every single one of Lilah's ball-clenching moans.

Our plates haven't been touched. Not one of us has taken a bite.

I'm hypnotized, watching Lilah and Orion laughing, eating. There's a lightness in the room that I haven't felt in years.

Everything is always heavy with our pack.

Responsibilities and disappointments. Orion feeling like he has to live up to some ridiculous omega standard, me failing to live up to Scorpio's expectations.

It's a different world as Lilah bites into an atomic-hot fry.

Orion hands her a glass of water, grinning this golden, darkness-obliterating smile that's sunshine after a storm.

I take my first full breath in weeks. I don't know the last time Orion smiled like this.

Years. Maybe high school.

When I remember I'm supposed to be eating, I bite into the burger and my eyes roll back.

So fucking good. Makes the takeout we've been living on taste like plastic.

We haven't had a home-cooked meal since we lived at the compound. Before Orion awakened and we moved to the country home the dads bought as a gift for our future mate.

We'd all pictured more of this. Family dinners. Domestic shit.

Nothing about our pack has followed the dads' plan. I wouldn't change a thing, but I can't shake the nagging guilt.

I'm tempted to let the moment go on, to pretend that this could be a permanent way of life, because damn, I'd love to see Orion smile like this every day.

But I can hear the seconds ticking on Lilah's time with us.

When the alarm rings, we're in for a nasty wake-up call.

One whiff of Lilah's pheromones, and instead of this happy fake family dinner, we'll be looking at a war zone.

"How long until you awaken?" I may as well have pulled the pin on a grenade.

Lilah's smile falls off her face like a hubcap spinning free on a bumpy back road.

She covers her arm, pressing right over the bullet wound hidden under her sweatshirt. "Never. I'm not going to awaken."

I swallow at the sorrow in her eyes.

Finn flashes me a look that reminds me how many knives he carries. His dominance stabs at our bond. I take the force like a punch, not giving, my alpha rearing up to remind him who the fuck runs this pack.

He pushes one more time, and I can *feel* him shooting me two tall mental middle fingers.

When Finn turns back to Lilah, his voice is rough honey. "Don't worry, Babydoll. We'll keep you forever."

"No," Jett says stiffly, "After she awakens, she's gone."

Orion goes so still I can't tell if he's breathing.

Fuck. I shouldn't have brought this up.

Maybe I was wishing we *could* keep her, but I know how ugly this ends if the guys start catching feelings. "You're welcome to stay as long as there's no change in your scent."

Honestly, I'm starting to like having her around.

I like the way she lights up Orion.

The way I can't.

"I'm earning money. I'll disappear as soon as I have enough in my account." Lilah fiddles with her napkin like she'll find the answers by crumpling it into smaller and smaller folds.

“Earning money doing what?” Hunter asks in a too-worried tone.

“Accounting. Bookkeeping. I like math.”

“Forensic financial accounting,” I mutter, remembering the oddball line from her bio.

“And shiv whittlin’,” Finn says happily. “Where do I put in my order? You have an Etsy?”

Lilah looks past Finn, meeting my stare without a flinch.

A rumble of approval rises inside me. I bite it back, but shit. Not many alphas can meet my eye.

“I won’t outstay my welcome.” There’s something dark in her voice. Desperate. But I can’t scent her to read more, and that flash of truth disappears when she withdraws, shoulders hunching into a cocoon of protection.

“We’re not kicking you out,” Orion says, and I can’t believe he’s the one speaking up for her. “You said you’d help me, right?”

“With what?” *And when did they bond so deeply?*

“Omega secrets.” Orion leans closer to her, so obviously trying to cheer her up it sends a pang through my asshole heart.

“I’ll help,” she answers in a soft breath. “But I promise, I’ll be gone before I cause trouble.”

“You’re not leaving until the Redfangs are gutted,” Hunter says harshly.

Even Jett nods. “We’ll have the situation under control soon.”

“Do you need help with surveillance?” Orion asks. “I can—”

“No,” I say before he can get rolling. I want him home, resting, safe. Not in the field. Not in danger. “We have it handled.”

“Right.” Orion pushes a fry around his plate, eyes downcast.

There’s a brick in my gut.

I fucked up again.

It’s like everything I say or do kills his light.

But Lilah—like a total fairy—squeezes some god-awful sauce into the smear on his plate, jams in a fry, and offers it to his lips. “Kranch and Thai peanut. Winning combo.”

His smile doesn’t stop, even when he folds his lips around the fry and his nose wrinkles at the weird-ass flavor. He grabs two bottles and makes a counter-offer. “Thai chili and chipotle mayo. Don’t tell me yours is better.”

Their dinner devolves into a condiment war, but the easy lightness is shadowed. Maybe dead.

The alphas are silent, stuck in their heads.

“My room?” I stand when I’m done, catching Orion’s eye.

I push my instincts back so I can function, instead of fucking him every second of every day, but there’s never a moment I don’t ache for my mate.

The other guys disperse, muttering gym or work or wherever they’re off to spend our rare free night.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Orion looks at Lilah like she’s a teddy bear he wants to cuddle. I don’t fucking know if I should nip this shit in the bud or encourage him.

“All good.” She waves him off. “Go ahead. I’ll do the dishes.”

“You don’t have to—” At least three of us start.

She snorts the cutest laugh. “Go. I like cleaning. It’s a weird omega thing.”

“Is it?” Orion frowns at his dirty plate like this is news.

It’s news to me.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Rest though. Your arm—” Orion starts.

“It’s fine. Promise. Good night.”

I take Orion’s hand and tug him from the kitchen, fighting the pull to look back, this stupid, sudden urge to not leave her alone. When I curl my fingers through his, and he doesn’t do the same, I realize he’s just as distracted, gazing over his shoulder at the girl we’re leaving behind.

She’s going to be a problem.

What kind, I don’t know.

The thought falls out my head as soon as we’re upstairs and Orion sinks into my side, slinking his arm around my waist.

My switch flips.

Omega.

Mine.

I haul him up, slam his back against the door. Orion tilts his face to meet mine, slipping a soft, low moan of contentment when his thighs hook around my hips. His cock is hard. Ready.

One hand clawing into his soft curls to remind him who he belongs to, I claim his mouth, pushing my tongue between the seam of his wet, pink lips.

His pheromones are candy.

His scent, his taste, drive me fucking insane.

My knot aches because every day I’m not buried, coming deep inside him is one day too long.

Orion grabs my shoulders, already working his lithe hips, grinding his hardness against mine, scent smoky with lust.

“Atlas…” he murmurs against my lips. “Please.”

My omega’s plea is my command.

His sharp, needy sweetness, the way his fingernails claw my shoulder blades on the wrong side of desperate, they’re all little digs, reminding me I haven’t fucked him right.

I haven’t taken care of him properly.

Tonight, I’ll give him everything he needs, dick him down until he begs me to stop, limp and weeping, destroyed with fucking pleasure.

Coaxing his lips open with my tongue, I carry him to the bed. I lower him onto the cool sheets without breaking the kiss.

I can’t. I want to devour him, the sweet, needy side of him that makes my instincts rage to bite, protect, claim.

He claws my back, the hit of pain lighter fluid in my veins as he tries to drag me tighter, closer, begging me to take him, his soft tongue and hot breath mingling with mine.

My cock rises, knot swelling. *Gonna fuck him for hours.*

Then I taste something cool on my tongue. Iced cider like a sad, fallen apple left out in the frost.

I cup the back of his head, gently tugging his soft curls.

His eyes are glassy as sapphires. Orion turns away, looking down, trying to hide, but the tear tracks on his cheeks are a knife to my gut.

I don't have to ask who hurt him.

It's always me. *Always fucking me.*

"What's going on?" I want to wipe his tears with my thumb, lick them clean, but he squirms, and it's not the good way. His scent is sour apple as he avoids my gaze.

I want to help him put his pieces back together, soothe him, reassure him, but Orion pulls away.

He doesn't trust me.

I've hurt him too much.

Orion wipes his own tears and pulls himself together while I look on like a useless fuck.

"Sorry," he says through glistening eyelashes. "Didn't mean to ruin the mood."

Shit.

He should *never* apologize to me.

"Orion."

His gaze flicks to my face. Biting his lip, he rises, trying to steal a kiss, to pretend that shit didn't happen. No matter that I'm hard as fuck, dying to pound into him, I tug him back by his hair, dragging him into the pillow.

He lets out a moan so throaty my balls bounce.

We'll revisit that.

“Orion,” I bark but I don’t have the heart to force him if he won’t admit what’s wrong. My voice softens, a request and not a command. “Tell me.”

He melts under my dominance, sagging against the pillow.

“I miss you.”

The words are a bullet between the brows. My ribs tighten, heavy with the weight of all my wrongs. “I know I haven’t been around. The Red—”

“It’s not that. It’s *this*.” Orion squeezes my shoulders, pulling me harder against his length.

“I always want you.” I grind my hard cock against his jeans, letting him *feel* that nothing has changed between us. Nothing will ever change between us.

“That’s not true.” He shakes his head, another stab to my chest. “Fuck. I’m the worst omega.”

“No.” I tip his chin and force him to look me in the eyes. *Please, let him see what he means to me.* “You’re *mine*.”

“Lilah.”

I flinch.

“You like her.” He tilts his head, curious instead of fucking pissed.

He *should* be pissed. “You like her too.”

“There’s something about her.” He strokes the back of my neck, making my balls tighten. We need to have this conversation, but my cock’s an impatient dick who doesn’t understand why my omega’s still fully clothed when we have him pinned underneath us.

I force myself to engage my upper brain.

“Maybe she’s playing games with us.” Maybe it’s all a lie. A ploy to slip under our skin.

If it is, it’s fucking working.

“She saved my life.”

I drop on top of him, pressing my face to the hollow of my mate’s neck. Dragging my nose over my bite, I drink in his pulse and his scent and the

way he shivers underneath me.

All to make sure that he's still alive.

It was so close.

If Lilah didn't react, Orion would already be buried.

That's all I need to know. She saved him, and we owe her.

"She's too…" Orion searches for the word. "Too considerate? She could've watched me die and taken my place, and no one would've said shit. But even before. In the limo? She bends over backward to not step on my toes. I *try* to hate her, and I just…"

"You're trying to hate her?" In what world would Orion share his hot sauces with someone he hated?

Looks more like he's lovesick.

I'd be destroy-the-sun-end-the-world jealous if he smiled at another alpha like that.

Shit.

Why aren't I jealous?

"She's just so perfect. She's tiny and beautiful and knows exactly what to say and you're going to—" he chokes off.

"Going to what?" I growl against his ear, loving the tremble that rolls down his body, aching to take him, but I have to dig to the bottom of whatever's hurting enough to have him crying in my arms.

He shudders, rising to grind his hips against me. I channel the Buddha like a fucking monk, resisting the urge to spread him out.

"Tell me." I nip his ear.

"She's going to steal you," he whispers, almost fucking breaking me.

"No." I pull him tight, aching that I let him sink into these doubts. "She's not. Never. No one can replace you."

"Tell that to Finn and Hunter. Fuck. Jett can't even look at her and he's in love with her."

Oh, I'll tell them.

Tell them we need to keep our distance. We owe Lilah, but that's it. Orion is the beginning and the end of our pack.

"You're ours." I drag my teeth down his neck, kissing and sucking the silvery patch of skin where my ownership is branded into his flesh. "You're *mine*."

"*Alpha*…" his breathy voice is too much sin to resist.

I run my hands down his body, cupping the front of his jeans, where the long length of his cock rises to meet me. "Who told you I like things tiny?"

Orion groans. "If you don't fuck me, I—"

"You'll what?" I flip us, pinning his chest to the bed, so I can grind my knot in the split of his ass. He lifts onto his elbows, grinding into me, begging for it.

"Please, Atlas." With the soft whine in his voice and my name on my lips, *fuuuuck*.

I rip off his jeans, his shirt, his briefs.

I only stop to prop pillows around him, making sure he's comfortable while I suck out his soul.

My mate's cock is a work of art. Nothing about Orion is small.

He's not built like the standard omega and I wouldn't change a fucking inch of him.

Gripping the soft iron length of his shaft, I take his perfect pink head between my lips.

His hips lift, ass rising off the pillows. I hold him down with a firm palm, pinning him where I want him as I lower my mouth to his cock.

"Ah! That's—" Orion twitches.

The scent of his slick has me diamond hard.

Lowering until he's sheathed in my mouth, I work my throat as I trace his entrance with a fingertip. Already soaking for me. His slick drips onto the sheets. *Fuck yeah.* A satisfied rumble builds in my chest. The vibration has him moaning, bucking his hips, driving into my throat.

I pull back, releasing his cock with a wet plop, and kissing the weeping head as I drag him by his knees.

Now his eyes are glassy for all the right reasons as he stares up at me with that glazed, fuck-me-dead look that has me aching to fulfill his every desire.

Pushing apart thighs dusted with soft blond hair, I kneel between his legs and lift his hips off the bed. His cock rides high and hard against his belly, glistening with pre-cum and my spit.

He's *dripping* for me, silvery strands of slick falling to the sheets, soaking them with his scent and his need.

"Ready for me?" I kiss his navel, licking down the hard plane of his stomach, all the way to his slick-soaked crease.

Hand to god, his slick tastes like cider apples.

It doesn't, but pheromones are a fucking mind trip.

His sweetness makes me crave him every moment of every fucking day, and I wonder what he sees in me that even lets him tolerate me when I've treated him so shitty.

I swear, I'll make it up to him.

I swear, I'll worship him the way he deserves.

I swear, I'll burn away the image of Lilah pressed between us, my cock buried in her sweet pussy while Orion fucks her from behind.

I tease my tongue inside him, making him buck and whine. His scent sharpens with need. "Please. Don't fucking tease… I can't… I need…"

I'd do fucking anything to be worthy of him.

I slide off my belt, kick off my pants, and free the straining length of my cock. It's thick with need for him, my balls drawn up as my knot swells at the base, aching to sink inside his ass.

Orion licks his lips, gaze locked on my knot. Hypnotized, he crawls to me, drawn to me the same way I'm drawn to him. It's not his mouth I'm craving tonight.

I grab him by the hips and flip him so he can brace against the headboard because I'm about to rail the shit out of him.

Slow, gentle, I remind myself, not giving into the rising violence that wants to rut and fuck 'til he's screaming my name.

I work him open with my fingers, but it doesn't take much with an omega, his ass already slick and ready for my cock.

When four fingers slide inside and he starts to rock back, trying to fuck himself, I grip his hips hard and line my tip at his entrance.

"Are you ready for me, Omega?" I tease his hole with my thick cock, loving the way his greedy hole twitches.

"Yes, yes." He arches his back.

Gripping his hips with one hand and my shaft with the other, I guide myself inside him.

"Fuuuuck." Pressure, slow and steady. He's hot. So fucking hot, the way he flutters around my cock, wetting it with his addictive slick.

He moans as I slide inside, working to take my thick cock to the base. I don't stop until my knot rests against him, throbbing, aching to bury itself in his heat. I push until he's sitting on my lap, head bouncing against my shoulder, grabbing the headboard like it's the only thing keeping him from shattering.

"Knot?" I ask roughly.

"Need it," he gasps, trying to bounce, to force it inside. His weeping cock presses hard against his belly, the tip red with ache and longing.

I feel the rut just below the surface.

The mindless need to fuck and bite and claim him until he's coming apart, nothing but need for my cock.

I clamp him close and start to rock my knot inside him, deeper, deeper, deeper with each stroke of my hips.

Finally, impatiently, Orion clenches his inner muscles, sucking me inside. Hot blood rushes, inflating my knot until I'm stretching every inch

of him, our bodies bound so tightly that the frantic beat of his heart echoes in my chest.

“Mate.” I suck his neck, kissing the mark that joins our souls as I work my hips, rocking, rocking so deep inside him, all I can feel is his heat.

“Atlas, Atlas… Unh~” he chants my name, fingers digging into my forearms as he’s rocked helplessly to my rhythm, sun-kissed eyelashes fluttering.

I stroke his shaft hard and slow until he’s keening.

The first orgasm sends him shuddering, coming apart in my hand. When his insides tighten, fluttering around my cock, I drive up into him with a roar.

He comes again as I do.

Then again, and again, and again, every time, my hot seed searing him, branding him deep inside.

Mine.

He writhes on me, insatiable, milking my cock back to hardness again and again, both of us swept away.

“Mine.” I bite his mate mark as my balls tighten again, another wave of come shooting inside him.

Orion cries, his cock spouting off, arms gripping me, leaning into my bite.

Perfect.

Hours later, a shaking orgasm rocks Orion so hard that he passes out. I come one last time, so spent that my knot finally deflates.

As my mate falls asleep in my arms, I remind myself how lucky I am.

I don’t deserve this or him, but I’ll never let him go.

And fuck the part of my brain even now, even after *that*, strays to the girl in our basement, wishing she could’ve joined.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

LILAH

I'D HAVE to be dead and cremated with my ashes spread in the Arctic to not hear the panty-wetting moans and groans of the acrobatic, honestly *aspirational* monkey sex happening upstairs.

I juggle the dishes into the washer while my temperature rises so high I might need to call a firetruck.

But the only men I want putting out this blaze are the ones who threw the match, rutting like they're filming their reel for the sex Olympics.

Goddess, I hope they're filming.

I dash downstairs, lock myself in the bathroom, and splash with water that doesn't do shit for this heat.

The face in the mirror is unrecognizable, my pupils blown out, grey eyes wide and dark. A flush pinkens my pale cheeks and my lips part as I pant, my pulse moving too fast, my breaths coming too fast, everything too fast, too hot, *too much*.

I catch a hint of something sweet on the air.

Vanilla sugar, rich and longing.

A scent that shouldn't exist, can't exist.

Mother-fucking-shit-on-a-biscuit.

Fully clothed, I jump in the shower, then strip off the soggy, scent-stained clothes and toss them in a heap. With half a bottle of soap, I scrub

my flesh raw, keeping the water so molten I’m more lava monster than omega.

I wish I could swirl down the drain.

I can’t stop picturing the Orion who made those moans. Are all four of them up there, working him over on the pack bed?

Can he take all their knots in one session?

Orion must look like a blond god when he’s spread out underneath them. Atlas looming over him, *dominating* him…

My clit swells, aching to join the threesome in my mind.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

Arousal means I’m deep in pre-awakening. My body’s waking up and it won’t be long before it demands more than just glances from the alphas I can’t stop obsessing over.

The best thing to do would be to flip the water to glacial and think unsexy thoughts like sandpaper and toenails until the ache disappears.

But am I a saint?

No, I’m fucking not.

I tease my nipples, run my hands down my belly, then brace against the shower wall as I tease my clit in slow circles, imagining what it would be like to ride Orion’s face, to have him pressed under me, with those blue eyes alight between my thighs.

My slick flows, but the water hides the damning scent, washing it down the drain.

My fantasy is so real I can taste green apples.

The alphas would let Orion and I kiss and play, exploring each other's bodies, letting us tease ourselves higher and higher until we’re begging for their knots. Then they’d share us. Between them, all of them, Atlas barking out who and where to fucking take me.

Hunter hugging me from behind, fucking me into Finn's mouth. Or Jett, making sweet, slow love to me, showing me his soul through his dark, galactic eyes while I watch Atlas drive Orion to insanity on his cock.

My cunt aches, my clit singing, but I crave more. The big alpha knots I've only seen in porn. My insides clench, craving the fullness I know the Wyverns could give me *sooooo good*.

Atlas pulling me onto his lap, letting me sink slowly down his cock, stretching so wide to swallow his knot.

His teeth in my neck, his bite claiming me for the pack *forever*…

My fingers slip inside my entrance, one, then two, then three, but they're not enough, even as I pump harder and faster, chasing the pleasure that sinks me deeper and deeper into my body.

"Mine," Atlas growls in my dreams, biting my neck as Orion whispers in my ear, *"ours."*

I come, biting my forearm, strangling the desperate yelp that echoes in the bathroom.

Weak-kneed, I pant against the wall.

As the edge of my hunger fades, the post-nut clarity reminds me that I'm seriously fucking deluded.

There's no scent on my body when I finally step out of the shower looking like a cooked lobster with a third-degree sunburn. My arm stings like a bitch.

Because oh yeah, *gunshot*.

I towel off, replace my bandage, then slather with the de-scenting lotion that I'm going to run out of way too soon. I need more. More bleach and pads and *lies* if I'm going to keep this truth hidden.

The truth that I want them.

The truth that I can *never* have them.

I want to enjoy the fantasy while I can, to hover near them and play pretend before I have to run back to the hole where I belong.

So, shower quickie aside, I can’t let down my guard. I can’t relax. Between healing and the huge meal I couldn’t stop myself from eating as Orion tempted me with sauces like my personal Tabasco angel, I’m not just drowsy.

I’m eyes-falling-down exhausted.

But this is exactly where I’ll slip up.

I need to wash my clothes. I have so few outfits, one clinging hint of perfume could bring me to ruin.

Minus the extra-long T-shirt and panties I’m wearing, I grab my entire wardrobe in one armful and head to the laundry room.

I realize my mistake the second the door swings open.

Hunter and Finn circle each other on the mats, sparring.

Shirtless.

Tiny shorts.

Every glistening muscle on display and twice as deadly as my fantasies.

Hunter’s bronze chest is tatted with geometric patterns so elaborate I wanna become a cartographer and map every line. They flow from his bobbing Adam’s apple, down his cut arms and eight-pack abs, disappearing into the waist of shorts so fucking obscene I can see every inch of what he’s packing.

It’s *a lot* of inches.

I don’t have a ruler, but if I did, I’d be fanning myself with that shit because ten is the *conservative* guess.

Finn’s back is to me, tight shoulders pale and shimmering with sweat. No tattoos, but scars. So many scars. Burns, grazes, bullet wounds.

And… A shark bite?

Maybe not, but his huge shoulder scar is gnarly. I’d pay more attention to it, but my eyes have their own agenda, dipping to his V-line, and the clingy shorts that show off his ass dimples.

Whoever bought their workout gear deserves a fucking medal.

You’re the MVP, booty short angel.

The way they move…

Hunter’s so jacked, I’d expect him to be slow, but Finn can’t land a clean hit. They punch, kick, try to sweep the other’s legs out. Finn looks like he’s barely moving, but he’s this coiled, deadly stillness. It’s like watching a pit bull fight a viper.

My body lights up, aching to jump between them.

I swallow a mouthful of saliva.

“Lilah?” Hunter lifts out of his fighting stance, every ab waving hello as he unfolds. “You okay?”

“Laundry,” I yelp, scurrying to the machine and praying I caked on enough lotion because the room reeks of Hunter’s sweet smoke and Finn’s orange-drenched scent that makes me wanna spread my legs and let them take turns doing whatever the fuck they want to me.

Or they can do me together.

Go, teamwork!

Except one whiff of the truth and they’ll send me packing.

I’m frantically shoving clothes into the washer when I feel the presence at my back. I reflexively dodge the attempt to grab my shoulder, spinning around, already gripping the blade I tucked into my panties.

“Babydoll.” Finn grins like a girl getting her first bouquet of roses. “Where were you carrying that knife?”

I exhale, but only allow myself to take back in a shallow lungful. I can’t get sucked in by Finn’s too-tempting scent. “You don’t want to know.”

“Oh, *I do*. Why don’t you show—”

“Finn.” Hunter yanks him away. “Let her breathe.”

I hesitate when I should put in the soap and leave the room, but Hunter’s watching, and he won’t miss when I pour in a fucking lid full of de-scenter that an unawakened omega shouldn’t need.

“I didn’t mean to bother you. Just keep doing your thing.” I move to the dryer and yet another load of their clothes that I’ve been working on cleaning. I need to wash my stuff more often than they do, and every time I’m down here, I’m surrounded by piles and piles of their sweat-soaked, fever-inducing laundry.

The fact that even their dirty clothes turn me on is a source of shame that I’d rather die than admit.

Like I said. Not a saint.

More like a hussy trying to hide underneath a habit.

And I’m not sure how much longer I *want* to hide.

“Why are you washing our clothes? Aren’t we paying Craig to play houseboy?” Finn turns to Hunter.

“Orion told him to stop when his boxers started going missing.”

I drop the T-shirt I’m folding. “They *what?”*

Okay, yeah, I think anything that smells like Orion is sexy as fuck, but even I’m not depraved enough to steal his *boxers*.

Unless he says I can.

But stealing without permission?

That’s some stalker shit.

“Is that what happened?” Finn licks his lips. “Gonna have a talk with Craiggy.”

I look away from the sexy psycho, glancing to Hunter, who shrugs. “It’s not our business.”

“He’s your mate.” I fume, thinking how Craig skulks around while Orion’s home alone. “Does Atlas know?”

“Orion didn’t tell him.” Hunter shrugs again, like it’s not even a little bit his issue.

Is this a man thing? An alpha thing?

Like, are they not supposed to share their problems with each other?

“Isn’t there security footage?” I haven’t missed the cameras in the corner of every room.

“Jett would know,” Hunter says.

“Where is he?”

“His office. But I don’t think you—”

I leave Hunter and Finn, stomping up the steps. My heart stutters when I reach the second floor and the bougie chandelier winks at me in a way-above-your-paygrade warning, but I can’t let this shit go.

If it were me, I’d hide and bide my time, avoiding Craig until he forgets me or I have to stab some sense into the asshole.

God knows he’s not the first creeper beta I’ve handled.

But this is Orion. And this creeper is in his *home*. Every day.

How can you be sane with that? Just the idea of being around Craig feels oilier and oilier, like khaki stained with meat grease.

Bracing myself, I climb the stairs.

A sultry, gut-clenching moan freezes my bare feet to the plush carpet runner.

Right. The monkey sex.

I was angry enough to forget.

A door whips open down the hall, and for a heart-stopping moment, I wonder what I’ll do if they ask me to join. But the man who stalks out looks more likely to slit my throat than give me a ticket to the sexcapades.

“What are you doing?” Jett advances, and my brain struggles to layer the boy of my memories over the sneering demon who might kick me down the steps.

The urge to shrink and hide is strong, but I’m done giving in. I force myself to stand straight, to not show Jett the smallest flinch. “I need to talk to you.”

“Atlas…” Orion’s muffled moan turns the air to plasma.

My nostrils flare, and heat trickles between my legs. *Please don't perfume.*

"Make it quick." Jett moves fast, almost jumping back inside his room.

Guess I'm not the only one who can't handle the soundtrack.

Especially now that I know exactly who to picture having fun. Orion and Atlas are playing solo.

I scamper after Jett, eager to put a solid door and a few padlocks between me and the moans that stroke my insides like velvet.

Jett directs me into his office. My first deep breath swaddles me in the scents of both him and Orion, cedar and cider.

I swallow, and my heart beats too fast, too aware that Jett and I are all alone in an enclosed space.

Like all those years ago.

"Why did you stop visiting me?"

He goes so rigid the only tell he isn't a statue is the sharp glitter of hate in his dark eyes. "You can leave if that's what you came to ask."

The dismissal stabs one of the few soft spots left inside me.

I never meant anything to him.

I know I need to get a grip, to stop whining and keep moving. It's not the first time someone I love has decided to hate me.

But this one hurts.

JJ was my only oasis in hell.

"That's not why I'm here." I shake off the ghosts, ignoring the feeling of rot in my lungs, the heavy, dense rejection that rolls around my belly like tacks in a tumbler.

"Well?" A muscle strains in his cut jaw.

"Craig. He's being creepy. But not usual creepy. Scary creepy."

"Our pack's security isn't your concern." The coldness in his voice hits like a punch from a six-fingered fist.

I’m good at taking hits, but I don’t have to keep taking them from an asshole who can’t get over himself long enough to protect his own mate.

A fire lights my belly when I remember how Craig cornered us in the kitchen, and the hungry, scary way he keeps staring at his omega. “I don’t care if it’s not my business. I don’t feel safe with him and neither does Orion.”

“Orion would’ve—”

“No he wouldn’t.” It takes all my balls to cut off an alpha, especially when his irritated dominance rolls over me, trying to make me bow, but I’m the sword of fucking justice tonight, and I’ve seen enough of this pack to know how they work. I want to believe that the Jett who had my back at the party, the one who ran Noelle out of the room, will do the right thing, even if he’s set on hating me forever. “You guys don’t tell each other shit.”

Jett’s silence confirms that he’s hiding something, some soft spot that I swear I’m not here to poke, but they have to get their shit together for their omega. “If you’d just—”

“This is not your pack.” Jett’s dominance weighs down my shoulders, but I don’t twitch, don’t bend. “This will never be your pack. Don’t come in here pretending to be a victim, trying to seduce us in your T-shirts. Pretending to care about any of us.” He doesn’t move an inch, but he’s pressing me down so hard my knees shake. “We already have an omega. No one wants you.”

I knew this.

I knew all of it.

But hearing it from him. From the boy who gave me a dress. The boy who always had a cookie for me and a shy smile, the one who found me whenever I was crying alone.

Something rips inside me, and I realize that boy is dead.

The man in front of me, Jett, wants nothing to do with me. And if this is how he’s going to act?

Fuck it.

This man and his whole damn pack are just using me as a stop-gap in their cold war with their dads, and I'm stupid if I let myself fall for them.

I shouldn't be acting like I can keep them.

Like I'm *part* of them.

But a shiver rattles my spine when I try to walk away. "Check the security cams. Craig's not the kind of guy you want in your home."

Jett's sexy, floral cedar clings to my nose and haunts me on the gauntlet back to my cave. Orion rasps out Atlas's name, and just when I think I'm safe in the basement, I hear Finn and Hunter grunting, fighting, the noises melding into a sex symphony.

The burn starts on my cheeks and creeps down my throat until my heart boils in my chest. A warm ache tightens my lower belly, lower, lower, lower, until my cunt clenches, begging me to throw myself onto one of their cocks, where, *surely*, all my problems can be solved by a screaming orgasm.

Not today, Satan vagina.

Barefoot, no pants, I sprint for the lake.

I don't feel like myself until I'm body-lengths below the surface of the murky, ice-cold water, and my chest and skin finally go pleasantly numb.

I need to get the hell out of their house before I forget who I am and let myself be broken by a pack of self-absorbed alphas who don't give a shit about me.

I can't confuse my *longing* for what they have with an invitation to join, because they haven't and won't ever offer me a real place in their pack.

The gates are closed, and I better keep my fucking distance.

I just pray these hormones don't break me, because if I ever taste the Wyverns, I know I'll be lost.

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TWENTY-NINE

JETT

LONG AFTER LILAH LEAVES, I can sense her in my space. She taints my sanctuary, slender legs peeking out from under her oversized T-shirt. Her bare toes clenching and unclenching on the floor, and the dazed expression that sank her features while I poured poison into her elfin ears.

I feel like I'm spinning out.

Lilah doesn't belong here.

She belongs in the past, my one pure memory.

My nostrils work as if I can pull in her scent, but it's not there.

I gravitate to the security cams the same way I have every spare second since Lilah showed up in my home.

She's already out of the house, sprinting barefoot. A growl rises at the back of my throat.

It's cold at night, and our property's as secure as I can make it, but we have too many enemies. Even a stray hunter wandering the edge of our property could mistake her fleet footsteps and rich brown hair for the flight of a fawn through the underbrush.

Lilah strips off her shirt and dives into the lake.

She doesn't resurface.

I know exactly how long she can hold her breath. Three minutes is nothing. But I count the seconds, my blood pressure rising, every fiber

focused on the screen until her head finally, finally pops above the water.

Lilah starts to swim.

I wish she'd cross the lake and never come back.

I can't have her here, stirring shit, disturbing the carefully balanced status quo. Smiling and cozying up to Orion, making our pack house feel like a *home*.

Because what happens when she leaves?

She *will* leave.

I don't for a second believe she'll stay.

Why would she want to? With each of us more fucked up than the next.

And I'm the worst of all.

I want to scream into the night.

I want to hit the gym and punch the bag until it breaks, but then Hunter and Finn will want to talk.

I don't want to speak.

I want to remember what it feels like to be powerful. To have the control that Lilah steals from me with every glance and breath.

I send the text, grab my keys, and head out in my Porsche, taking the country turns so wildly that Finn would be proud.

I blast the same rock song I've been listening to on repeat for more than a decade.

Engine screeching, I roar up to a shoddy pack bar where the sign says *Diamonds*, but the street says crime report.

I'm barely parked when the female figure flies out the side, wrenching open the door and throwing herself inside the car, already ducking down, half submissive, half terrified.

Her omega scent is a rotten, sickly sweet mocha. Coffee and skunk.

"Renee."

"Al-Alpha." She trembles, perching on the seat like a bird ready to take flight. "We can't be seen here."

I slam into reverse, shoving her against her seat and enjoying the way she bites back her yelp. I take us down the street to the dodgy parking lot of a 24-hour grocery store where working girls line up for customers. Seeing Renee in my ride, none of them pounce.

She fidgets, toying with her too-short hem. “You should’ve called. It’s too big a risk coming in person.”

Some days, I’d rather die than see her face.

Others, I crave her fear. I need to know she knows how easily I can ruin her.

Ruin her the way she ruined me.

“What have you found?” I pin her under my dominance, holding her captive in my gaze.

Renee used to be attractive enough.

Now her black hair is crunchy with hairspray. The makeup she cakes on to hide the broken blood vessels of her drinking habit gathers in the shallow creases around her eyes, her lurid purple eyeshadow smudged. That bodycon dress is nowhere near tight enough to hold together her shit.

“Dominik has a mole at Wyvern House. Someone who knew your pack made an offer to a new female. That’s why he targeted you at the ball. He wants Li—”

“Don’t say her name.”

Renee whimpers at my bark, hunching into herself.

I won’t allow her to taint the one precious thing I have left.

“What’s his next play?”

“The soldiers don’t know. I’m working on one of his higher-ups. I’ll have him in my bed before my next—Ah, soon.”

Diamonds is under the Redfang organization. It’s not where the power players gather—I have other, more trustworthy sources digging there—but it’s the perfect gig for Renee with her bullshit story about how she was fired

from her cushy OCC training job. Her loud, well-documented resentment for my father makes a good cover.

And her real story is blackmail gold.

As she picks at her chipping manicure, uncomfortable under my attention, I take solace in the fact that I can kill her at any moment.

A bullet in the ear with the silenced gun under my seat. A slit throat. Or I could strangle her with my own hands and watch the life leave the eyes of the pedophile bitch.

The power settles the fraying parts of me.

I'm in control.

Even when the memory comes—the way the memory always comes—I can swallow it down.

"Have you ever touched an omega before, little Wyvern?" Renee grabs my hand, dragging it down her body to the heat between her legs. I freeze, half-hard and half confused. "Can you smell my scent? Do you want to taste it?"

I shudder, blinking away the past.

Renee fucked with me for a year before I got her fired. Now I own her, and watching her squirm is the only thing that keeps me from falling apart.

"If you like Lil-*her*," Renee stutters. "Keep her safe. The Redfangs are out for blood."

I snort.

Safe.

As if Renee can fathom what that means.

"I want to know the second you have more information." The sooner we nail Dominik, the sooner we can safely send Lilah packing.

The sooner I can go home without feeling like I'm in freefall.

I need her gone.

I need her to stop reminding me of everything that might have been.

Even if driving her away destroys us both.

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THIRTY

LILAH

WHEN I WAKE UP, my arm itches in the bad way that says I tore my stitches and soaked my bullet wound in lake water like an idiot with a septic death wish. Footsteps and the scent of coffee warn me they're awake upstairs.

Throwing off my covers, I grab my tablet and log on to work. Only this time, I log onto a different website.

Black market jobs don't make me warm and fuzzy, but cooking books for gangsters is a lucrative skill, and I'm just as good at spotting money laundering as I am at washing cash.

I can't afford to be picky with my awakening sinking in its fangs.

Jett's bark still echoes in my nervous system, the sickly vibration making me want to puke.

We already have an omega.

I stay in bed for hours, tapping on my tablet, cursing that I don't have a keyboard as I lean on my black market rep to hook up a few mafiosos who need help cleaning their accounts.

By the afternoon, my stomach won't stop rumbling. The house is quiet with the alphas gone off to work or kill a few dudes or whatever they do for fun.

When I start to feel woozy, I give in to the need for food and creep upstairs. I'm definitely sneaking some back so I don't have to risk crossing paths with Craig ever again.

I tiptoe to the fridge, ducking to rifle through the fruit drawer. I'm craving apples like crazy. Maybe I'll have a piece of cheese as a treat. Anything I can snag before—

"Lilah?"

I whirl to Orion.

He lifts his hands with a smile as soft as his loose sweater and comfy sweatpants. "Didn't mean to startle you. Are you making lunch?"

"Just grabbing a snack." Empty-handed, I shut the fruit drawer with my knee.

"Thing is…" He scrapes his skin, drawing my attention to his long, sexy forearms.

"Thing is?" I swallow, my pitch rising.

"I'm craving grilled cheese, but I turned them into hockey pucks the last time I tried." He chews his lower lip, shifting foot to foot, cheeks pink with embarrassment.

Cute.

I open my mouth to say *no, I'm working, and I'm not falling like that curl that falls over your forehead.* What comes out is, "Should we make tomato soup?"

"Yeah." Orion's grin sets off fireworks in my gut. Big, sparkly, booming ones that have my insides going *ooh ahh* instead of drawing a line.

Can I not say no to him?

Am I that broken?

I brace myself as he steps closer, smelling like an apple cider donut. The scent is warmer today, more level and less needy. Even his muscles are a little looser. His hips worked out.

Guess that's what happens when your alpha fucks you for *six. Motherfucking. Hours.*

Not that I was counting.

But when I came back from the lake at the crack of dawn, they were still going hard enough that I hear Orion's soft, womb-melting mewls.

Looking deliciously well-fucked, Orion gathers the bread and cheeses while I start the tomato soup on the stove. We don't speak, but it's a comfortable silence as we dance in and out of each other's space.

"For you." I hand him the plate with the sandwich that's exploding with cheese, way fatter than the one I kept for myself.

"Spicy ketchup? Habanero aioli?" He opens the fridge to sift through his sauce collection.

"Spicy ketchup," I agree without much thought. I haven't tried that one yet, but it has to be delicious.

Grinning, he carries our plates to the breakfast nook, and we chow down, inhaling the food.

I'm ready for a three-hour nap when the cheese and grease hit my belly, but I need to spend the afternoon working.

"What are you up to the rest of the day?" Orion asks as we bring our dirty dishes to the sink.

"Accounting," I say casually. "You?"

"I was gonna work on code while my hormones aren't making me a banshee. You want to come upstairs? We could hang in the living room…" There's a bashful note to his voice, and he ducks his head, his ears turning red like he's asking me on a first date.

As much as I should say no, I just…can't.

I like being around him.

Too much. He's so sweet. So fun. With our time together so limited, so what if I want to be in the same room as him for just a little while longer?

“I’ll grab my tablet.” I hurry downstairs and slather on another layer of lotion. The tiny bottle is seriously almost empty, and if I run out, I’m going to have to start spritzing with the hardcore industrial cleaner.

Anything to keep my scent hidden.

When I’m positive my perfume isn’t leaking, I head back upstairs.

Orion sits in the corner of the leather sectional sofa with his knees propped on a hassock, and his laptop propped on his knees. He frowns at his screen. I don’t bother him, sinking into the cushions on the far side.

It’s sinfully comfy, the leather ingrained with all the guys’ scents, and broken-in to perfection. I have every plan of working, but I’m so full, so lulled, so tired from all my workouts that my eyes start to fall, and I slip under before I can help myself.

“Fucking shit,” Orion’s mutter jolts me awake.

I panic, thinking I’ve scented in my sleep, but he’s not paying attention to me, leaning hard into his laptop screen.

I let out a heavy breath that has him peeking up from his work.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“It’s fine.” I have no business sleeping in front of him, right in the living room where any of the guys could come home at any moment and catch a face full of my perfume.

“This project is killing me.” He lets the laptop slide off its cushion and rubs the back of his neck.

“What are you working on? Or is it classified?”

He makes a frustrated noise in his throat. “I’m not allowed on the Wyvern House servers. I’ve been coding a video game for fun.”

“A game?” I ask, suddenly interested.

I took a few coding classes at the OCC and I liked them for the same reason I like math—lines of symbols that just make sense. It was only a basic class though. An intro for omegas who want to mate engineers.

Nerd packs are sexy.

“You want to see?” Orion asks hopefully.

“Sure.” Interested, I crawl across the couch to him.

Orion clicks around before offering me his laptop. “It’s a resource management game. You have to raise a wolf pack. Help them hunt, breed, expand the territory. The graphics aren’t there yet, but I’m trying to get the mechanics fixed before I go all-in, you know?”

The wolves are super pixely, but the interface is fully programmed, with a pack of little wolves bouncing on screen. I snort when I read the selected wolf’s name. “Finn?”

Orion smirks. “Check his stats.”

Aggression: 5

Curiosity: 5

Intelligence: 0

“Zero?” I laugh. Orion has his whole pack represented in 8-bit wolves, plus a bunch of tiny wolf pup babes that make my heart hurt.

“Should we add a Lilah wolf?” He steals the laptop from me.

He’s not reading into this game as deeply as I am, so I shrug. “Just make mine smarter than Finn’s.”

He switches to a code screen, with the cutest mischief grin. “Omega. Female. Intelligence, five. Strength, two? Oh, and size. Maybe a point five? Shit. I have to reprogram it for itty bitty wolves.”

“Very funny.” I take back the computer when he hands it to me and can’t help grinning like an idiot over the little Lilah wolf who just joined their pack. She’s white and grey, and I can’t believe he added another character so quickly. “This is cool. Will you sell it when it’s finished?”

“Nah. It’s just a hobby. I feel useless if I don’t do anything.” There’s a longing in his voice that makes my chest ache.

“Did you want to work at Wyvern House that badly?”

“Not really. I was expected to because my dad does. My brother’s the perfect secret agent. Now I’m just the pack’s house husband.”

I wince like he’s shooting fire arrows into my deepest insecurity. “I get it.”

I’ve never wanted to sacrifice my whole self to an alpha pack. Still don’t. “Why don’t you start your own company? It’s not like the guys are keeping you barefoot in the kitchen. With them always gone, start an empire. Who knows? Maybe you’ll make more than them.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” he says, in this cute helpless way that makes me want to pat his head and fluff up his confidence.

“Finish your game, register your company. Maybe hire Atlas as your bodyguard.”

Orion’s eyes sparkle. “Imagine him standing behind my desk in a suit?”

I don’t have to imagine. I’ve seen Atlas in a suit. I’d put him *under* the desk and pay him to work overtime between my thighs. “Nevermind. You’d never get shit done.”

“Right?” He laughs and leans into me, not even a little bit territorial when I just admitted how hot I am for his pack leader. “What do you think of this?”

He shows me another feature, then another, and by the time I realize what’s happening, we’re pressed side-to-side on the couch, snuggled under the same blanket with his laptop balanced on a throw pillow that straddles our laps.

His game is amazing.

Orion is amazing.

And I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a friend.

An amazing-smelling, super molten hot omega friend whose scent makes me want to count how many licks it takes to get to his ooey-gooey center.

But yeah. *A friend.*

He has me giggling over the tongue-lolling animations on Finn’s zero-IQ wolf when we hear the front door open.

I reach for the knife hidden in my bra.

Orion pulls a handgun from between the sofa cushions and flicks the safety. He holds the gun with this cold, casual confidence that says he knows exactly how to handle his weapon.

And I'm going to be replaying the way his forearms flex and his expression hardens during my private alone time in the shower.

"Omega?" Craig's whine sets me shivering.

Orion makes a disgusted noise before stowing the gun in its hiding hole. He's straightening our blanket when Craig walks around the corner.

"There you are. I—" His eyes bug when he spots us pressed together on the couch. I squirm under his icky gaze. "What are you doing?"

Orion answers the pointed question meant for me. "We're working on a project. What are you doing? You're not scheduled to be here."

I don't imagine the hint of a growl in his voice.

I definitely don't imagine how it makes my thighs clench. I want to *feel* that growl against my throat.

"I came to check on you," Craig says defensively. "And good thing."

I open my mouth, ready to tear him down the way this creeper so desperately deserves, but I catch a hint of caramel.

My heartbeat skyrockets, and I realize my temperature is up, a flush stinging my cheeks.

How long?

Did Orion already notice?

I throw off the blanket, grab my tablet, and flee.

"You don't have to go," Orion calls behind me.

"Bathroom!" I call, singsongy and fooling no one.

I breeze past Craig, holding my breath, trying to will my pores closed. Downstairs, I fly into the shower.

My perfume keeps rising.

I toss my clothes and pad that needs to be sealed up and burned, then start to scrub.

A while later, I step out of the bathroom, lotioned, wearing nothing but a towel, and clutching my soiled clothes like they're radioactive. I need to do laundry again, erase the damning scent.

I'm booking it to my room, already planning how to hide my latest slipup when I bump into Craig.

My brain's a million miles away, and he snatches my wrist before I can dodge, pulling my entire arm as he lifts my dirty clothes to his nose.

Craig pulls in a breath, and his pupils blow.

I am so fucked.

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THIRTY-ONE

LILAH

"NICE PERFUME." Craig licks his lips, and it's like fire ants crawling in my panties. I wrench back my arm, clothes falling to the floor.

"What are you doing down here?" I ask shakily.

"That's not real important anymore." He takes a threatening step toward me. "How long have you been lying to the pack?"

"I'm not lying."

"Then you won't mind if I tell Atlas he's housing an awakened slut, and I caught her seducing our omega."

My jaw locks.

I know the truth as well as he does. I haven't seduced shit. Wasn't going to.

But the other thing I know?

Atlas won't believe me.

At the end of the day, I'm just a *Darling*. An omega nobody wants for anything but sex.

I never named names when Noelle locked me in the closet because I knew I'd hurt worse if I tried to rat. Even after she kicked me until my ribs cracked, then left me alone for days with no food or water, just pain.

I didn't expect the trainers to start a crusade, to go after blood and justice, but I thought they'd at least care that I couldn't walk. I didn't need

an assembly about bullying, or even for Noelle to be punished. I just wanted someone, any one person, to give a shit that I'd been hurt.

Trainer Renee said I was stirring trouble.

Are you sure you didn't lock yourself in?

Did you even try to open the door?

Are you that jealous, Lilah? Do you need to put on such a desperate act to get attention from the alphas?

Motherfucker, I beat my head against that door.

Feels like I'm always beating my head against something, but no matter how I rage, they never believe me.

I *told* Jett that Craig was a problem.

Does he care? No.

I'm never anything but a troublemaker.

And Craig knows the truth just as well as I do. His thin-lipped smile makes me vibrate, wanting to cut the smug out of him.

If Craig tells the guys I'm perfuming, I won't be able to hide, and even if they don't toss me out on my ass, I'll be back at the OCC so fast. Hikaru will either auction me off to some nightmare pack or put me in permanent rotation.

I refuse.

Then, now, always.

That's not going to be my future.

"Let's make a deal." I kick my dirty clothes into the nest, then shut the door, not wanting Craig panting over my scent.

"You have nothing to negotiate with."

"We want the same thing. You want me gone. I want to be gone. So help me get out."

"You want to leave Wyvern Pack?" he asks skeptically.

"I need a way to disappear."

"I'm not paying you."

“I have my own money.” I roll my eyes. “Just get me off the property to a hotel the Wyverns can’t trace.”

“Are you deluded? They’re not going to chase you.”

I grit my teeth. *Like I don’t know?* “I need to get away from Hikaru.”

“Maybe. But what’re you gonna do for me?”

“I’ll be gone.”

“That’s not enough.”

“What do you want?”

He eyes me up and down and I instantly regret the question, my fingers brushing my knife.

If he says sex, I’ll castrate him.

“Put in a good word for me with the pack.”

My nose wrinkles. “They won’t believe me.”

There’s no way I could straight-faced walk up to Orion and be all *Craig’s a nice guy. You should give him a chance*.

Barf.

Not happening.

“Then pull away. Stop sucking up to the alphas and mooning over Orion.”

“Fine. But I want this plan locked down. You figure out how to get me past the house’s security and to a secure location. Then I’ll disappear.”

“It’ll take me a few days to set up.” Craig scratches his chin. “In the meantime, if I see you hanging all over them—”

“I won’t.” No matter how much my brain tries to convince me it’s okay to press close and give them the teeniest tiniest sniffs. Distance is what I need.

“If I hear you talking shit about me—”

“I won’t,” I insist, even though promising Craig *anything* makes me hate myself.

“See that you don’t.”

I want to punch him in the face, maybe stab him just a little as he walks away like a conquering hero.

I retreat to my nest, grab every blanket, and wrap myself in a burrito cocoon.

There are a thousand things I need to do to escape, and I've already thought through them all. Find a vehicle or buy tickets under my alias. Rent a short-term apartment where I can ride out my now-inevitable heat.

My traitorous inner omega is all toxic whispers.

You can just stay here.

If I tell the pack, if they accept me…

But they won't.

I know they won't.

The second Orion smells my perfume, he'll trade his smiles for snarls, and I'll lose the sweet, fun guy I'm starting to love spending time with. I'll lose Atlas's trust as soon as he realizes I've been lying.

Hunter won't speak up, Finn will forget me like an old stunt, and Jett will say he always knew I was trash.

I have to go.

I have to give them up.

Just the way I have to bury my last dream of ever finding love.

I FALL ASLEEP CRYING tears I'll never admit to, and wake up crusty-eyed, near-suffocating and weighed down with blankets at the sound of knuckles rapping at my nest.

"Lilah?" Hunter's muffled voice echoes. "Did you have dinner?"

His concern sneaks under my skin, popping up goose bumps and panic.

"Already ate," I shout back semi-hysterically. "Going to sleep."

He says something else that I block with fingers in my ears. Thankfully, he doesn’t knock again.

He’s long gone when my heart finally stops pounding.

When I peek out of the nest, it’s deep darkness—the middle of the night with every light off in the basement.

I change into my swimsuit and hit the lake.

I notice the surveillance drone following me as I grind out laps, and I let myself drop in the water, hugging my knees to my chest so I sink like a boulder.

I don’t like that they’re watching me.

It’ll be too easy for the dads to hunt me down. To demand I pay them what I owe or spread my legs and start popping out their grandbabies.

Either way, I’ll end up miserable and/or hated.

I spend the next few days avoiding the pack.

My scent is more and more erratic, and it’s better not to be around the Wyverns.

Totally the reason. Not at all because I’m pining for the alphas I have to abandon, and the sweet, sunshiny omega who keeps coming to check on me.

I spot Orion sitting by the lakeshore when I clock my millionth lap. My arm bones are gelatin at this point, my stamina wrecked as pre-awakening hits me with the hormone hammer.

In jeans and a sweater, he holds a huge, fluffy towel folded in his lap, waiting for me to swim to shore. It’s the kind of towel you see in magazines, a sunshine-smelling cloud that covers your whole body, not like the ratty hand towels I’ve always used.

And Orion. *Mr. perfect mate material.*

Ignoring the pull to him, whatever star-crossed hormone thinks we could ever be together, I keep swimming until I’m on the far side of the island lake. I crawl to shore and hug my knees.

I can’t avoid them forever.

Knowing the drones are circling, that I’m always being watched, I casually sniff myself. Thanks to the lake water, there’s no scent.

For now.

Orion could make me perfume so fast, and in nothing but a bathing suit, there’s nowhere to hide.

I clamber across the island, hopping over pokey branches and rocks that scratch my thin-skinned feet. The bullet hole aches the most, but it’s not itchy anymore.

I’ll live.

The seconds pass in wind, silence, and shivers. When I peek through the trees, Orion is still there, still waiting.

I feel sick to my stomach.

It would be so much easier to walk away if he stopped being nice and went back to the way he snarled when we met. But even then, even that very first day when he had every reason to think I was his enemy, Orion still followed me to the lake, still gave me his scent-drenched hoodie that I haven’t dared let touch my skin a second time.

There’s a soft whir as the drone dips to watch me watching Orion. I’m so done with the surveillance. So done with alphas and packs and the constant need to protect myself, to never relax.

I glance around until I find a nice round rock that’s just the right weight. Cocking back my arm, I aim and throw.

It pings the drone’s silent blades and spins away, but the drone wobbles. I launch another rock.

This time, it hits something glassy with a sharp *ching*, and the drone spirals down, spinning and spinning until it lands in the lake.

Then *glug*, and it’s gone.

I’ll leave the pack just like that.

Disappear and be done with them all.

And just like the drone, buried beneath the water, I bet none of them ever comes looking for me.

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THIRTY-TWO

FINN

BABYDOLL'S AVOIDING US.

I didn't notice because we've been in the shit. Scorpio has us hunting leads, trying to find that asshole Dominik. Atlas and Jett are in their fucking element, giving orders everywhere.

I haven't seen her in days.

That shouldn't bother me.

Lilah's just a pet. A plaything to take the edge off.

She was never going to be permanent.

I don't deserve permanent. I don't want permanent. Some soft, breakable fucking adorable little thing like Lilah?

She deserves love. I don't do love.

I only have two emotions. One is hog-wild.

The other? Fucking annoyed, and I'm feeling it hard.

My trigger finger twitches.

"You can't kill our target," Hunter says from the driver's seat of the big-ass panel van where we're pulling surveillance.

We're following some low-level Redfang, trying to trace him back to Dom, but this guy's been in a massage parlor for forty-five minutes. "He should thank me for letting him die on a happy ending."

"Then you explain to Kieran why we can't neutralize the threat."

“No thanks.” Dad and I have a church relationship. I think about him on Christmas, then eat a chocolate orange and make myself forget he exists until next season.

Damn. I miss eggnog.

Hunter leans against the steering wheel, unsubtly glancing at the dash clock. He can play cool all he wants. I know this asshole. “You’re thinking about her.”

“Bullshit,” he mutters, but there’s a tic in his jaw that calls out his shit.

Straightening in the passenger seat, I rub my hands together in glee. Undone Hunter is best Hunter. “Clubbing tonight? We need to get laid.”

“Not in the mood.”

Not in the mood to get laid?

Fucking impossible.

“You mean not in the mood to cruise for a rando when we have two sweet omegas waiting at home?”

His elbow slides off the wheel. “It isn’t like that.”

For the guy who sees everything, he’s pretty fucking oblivious.

“It’s like that for me.” We’re working around the clock, so Lilah’s asleep in her nest by the time we get home.

And I haven’t killed anyone this week.

I’m antsy as shit, and I can’t stop thinking about Lilah’s hair. How good it would feel tangled in my fist. I want to press my nose to her scalp, hold her close, and breathe in the scent that I know is gonna rock my world when she finally perfumes. “Whad’you think her scent will be? Maybe rain? Lightning storm?”

“Strawberries,” Hunter mutters.

Mmm.

I like where he’s going. I imagine licking a long line up Lilah’s neck. You know she’d taste like dessert. “Maple syrup? Fuck, imagine how she and Orion’ll taste together?”

Hunter hunches over the wheel like he can hide his monster bulge.

I lean back, putting my arms behind my head and showing off the package. My knot swells. Our omegas tangled, their scents and bodies and moans all wound up.

Yes, please.

Hunter scowls. “She’s not for us to play with.”

“Why not?” Lilah *exists* for playing.

All kinds of play.

Teasing. Biting. *Stroking*.

“Because she’ll hook you.”

Doubtful.

And anyway, why is that a problem?

I see how Orion looks at her. Lilah doesn’t have to be a problem.

She’s a gift. And fuck me, I’m going to unwrap her.

“There he is.” Hunter throws his focus back to the road, where the guy we’ve been following for hours steps onto the sidewalk with a goofy just-got-blown smile pulling his waxy lips.

A Redfang cobra tat peeks from his unbuttoned collar. I zero in on the spot as I reach for my gun. “Ten points if I hit a snake eye.”

“A hundred points if you stop talking.”

I shut up.

Points can be exchanged for nachos.

Hunter follows the dude from the wrong side of town to the condemned side of town, where he strolls up the steps to a boarded-up shack and ducks under a weather-aged strip of crime scene tape like he’s walking onto a yacht.

We may as well paint our van like the Mystery Machine because we couldn’t blend less if Hunter and I rocked out dressed as Daphne and Velma.

“I smell a trap.” I lick my lips, adrenaline pumping.

Fucking finally, this mission’s getting good.

“Atlas?” Hunter says into his com. “We’re compromised.”

“Hold position,” our pack leader commands through my earpiece. “Jett’s pulling your location on satellite.”

My blood pumps. I scan the streets. Plenty of big old trees and deserted rooftops.

Hope they have a sniper.

“Heat signatures show at least five inside,” Jett says in my ear. “Possibly more. We’re sending reinforcements.”

“Let’s do a head count.” I’d check my weapons, only I don’t have to. I have enough knives to take these assholes down three times over, two Glocks, and a partridge in a pear tree. (a.k.a. my back-up grenade).

“Vest?” Hunter asks.

I tap my Kevlar’d chest. “I’ll take the front. I know you love the back door.”

Hunter doesn’t laugh. He unstraps his gun and grabs my shirt, yanking me close. “I will kick your ass so hard if you go dark. Stay above water?”

“Sure, sure.” I brush off his hand but make no promises.

My blood sings.

Death calls.

While Hunter does his ninja shit, I walk straight to the front door. Stepping to the side of the doorframe, I knock with the butt of my Glock. “Who wants Thin Mints?”

A shotgun explodes.

The shot punches the boards, flaying the police tape.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bullets thunder, and the scent of gunpowder in the air sends me slipping down, down, down to my dark core, to the still, silent place inside me. Color fades from my vision.

Everything is shades of grey.

When I hear Hunter kick down the back door, I dive through the window.

Inside are four soon-to-be dead men.

I stab the guy within reach, world in slo-mo. His blood sprays, a brilliant red, streaking across the endless dark.

Three to go.

I don’t have to aim. Just squeeze the trigger.

Headshot.

Headshot.

Headshot.

Their bodies fall at the same time. My world’s black except for the dazzling red carpet pooling into the rotting floorboards.

Another shot rings in back.

“Backup!” Hunter yells, squeezing off a round of shots.

I bust through the hallway, into a blown-out kitchen where five more guys have Hunter pinned behind the doorframe.

I spot the knife a length before the tip pops my eyeball. Dodging, I duck the blow, feeling a short-lived line of fire on my cheek.

Fucker.

I change his eye color from blue to red with a flick of my balisong.

One by one, I take them out, barely feeling the round that dents in my stomach. Hunter snaps a neck. I shoot one in the mouth. Hunter lands a chest shot.

Then there’s one Redfang left standing.

I hit him in each hand.

Stigmata, motherfucker.

His scream sounds muffled.

He drops his gun, and the blood streaming through his mangled fingers looks like dull grey sludge.

I stand still.

I can feel my chest rising and falling. Rising and falling.

It's the only sign I'm alive.

Did I take a bullet?

Maybe I'm already dead. Maybe I died a long time ago, and that's why I can't feel.

"You with me, buddy?" Hunter covers my shoulders with warm palms, peering into my face.

His eyes should be brown, but they're a dark, colorless grey.

Lilah.

Lilah has grey eyes.

I think they'd sparkle even in the darkness.

I need to see her.

I need to see if her light can reach this far.

"Got one to bring in," Hunter says into the com. "Taking Finn home. We can debrief after he levels out."

When a Wyvern House team shows to clean the scene, Hunter drags me to our van. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. Even when he cranks the radio to death metal, I can't hear the beat.

I see darkness and blood.

A metal chair, my wrists bound, the blindfold blocking everything but the scent of my own blood and piss. The sound of their laughter.

They never stopped laughing.

Until I slit their throats.

Darkness pulses through my veins as we pull up to the house.

I should want to ride my bike with the lights off, smash a bottle over a bar and start a brawl, or drink to fucking oblivion, but instead I'm craving a hit of starlight.

I can feel where she is.

Something calls me downstairs, heavy as gravity. I follow the call, picking the doors that stand between me and Lilah.

She sits alone at the tiny kitchen table, a blanket over her shoulders, tapping at her tablet. Her chin jerks up. “Finn?”

I drink her in.

It feels like ages since I saw her. Too long.

Has she gotten more beautiful?

There’s a flush in her cheeks. A sparkling, blushing pink like she’s been drinking glitter smoothies.

Her eyes glitter too. A dark, smoky grey that cuts through the nothing.

I love when she levels those eyes at me, when her nose wrinkles and she furrows her brow, cute as shit. “You picked my lock?”

“Needed to see you.” I swallow her in my arms, pulling her from her chair. She’s color and heat and fucking *life*.

Lilah melts into me, slipping a soft moan as her arms and legs wind around me.

I carry her into the nest like I already own her. Dropping on the edge of the bed, I sit her so she straddles me, her nose buried against my neck.

I want to feel her teeth in me.

I want her mark.

You don’t deserve her, whispers the darkness.

Don’t I fucking know it. That won’t stop me from claiming her. Won’t stop her from leaving me, either.

But I don’t give a shit about forever.

I just want her *now*.

A rumble kicks up in my chest, because fuck, I’m angry I haven’t already made her mine.

Lilah jolts like I stuck her thumb in a socket. “Finn! I can’t— We can’t __”

I smooth her hair with the flat of my palm, and a soft, soothing purr, a sound I’ve never made in my fucking life, rolls out of me like I’m a natural. “Can’t what?”

“This.” She pulls away from me. “You and me. Me and your pack. You can’t betray Orion.”

Betray?

“Who’s betraying? We’ll invite him.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t. I’m leaving soon anyway. I—Finn!”

Lilah yelps as I roll us, pinning her to the bed.

Wide-eyed, she stares up at me, her pulse moving in her neck. I want to show her the darkness, but it bleeds away when I feel her underneath me. The soft puff of her breath, her trembling warmth.

She settles me.

The urges, the pain, the nothingness.

Everything fades until it’s just me, Lilah, and the long line of her neck begging for my bite.

I lean to lick her throat.

There’s no strawberry, maple, or cotton candy. No rain or storm or earthy goodness.

Lilah tastes like lotion.

A harsh chemical lotion.

I pull away, swallowing and working my unhappy tongue like I just licked a box full of envelopes. “What is that?”

“What is what?” She squirms out from under me, and I let her go when I hear the high note of panic in her voice.

“Babydoll. I’m going to buy you some new perfume.” Something fruity and lickable.

“Perfume?” Lilah yelps.

“Just until your real perfume comes in.” Then she won’t need a thing on her delicious skin.

“You have to go.” She says, withdrawing until her back’s against the wall.

She twinkles, but the farther away she moves, the more she looks like a star out of reach, the more the darkness crushes.

I can't be without her. Not tonight. "I can behave."

Fuck. I can try to behave.

No. I can. I can if that's what I have to do to be with her.

Lilah grips her T-shirt so hard the fabric stretches. There's something desolate about her that shoots pain through the spot in my chest where my heart used to live.

Is that fucker still beating?

"I…" She shivers, but forces herself to meet my gaze. "I like you."

My heart-space thumps. "Then we—"

"That's the problem." She digs her nails into the fabric, stretching the cloth tight across her belly. "I'll be gone and you'll forget me."

"I won't." *I can't.*

She shakes her head. "Tell that to Atlas. Tell it to Jett. I know when I'm not wanted."

She cradles herself and there's an unspoken *always* that I ache to soothe.

An ache?

Me.

Fucking what?

How?

She's supposed to be a toy.

A plaything.

My babydoll.

So why are pink and grey the only colors I can see? Why does my chest ache? My canines burn, begging me not to play but to mark her forever.

Mark her as mine so she can never escape.

Mark her as mine so that I can always find my way out of the dark by the light of my north star.

“Baby—” The nickname tastes like tar on my lips. It’s not right. It’s not her. “*Star*. You can’t leave.”

“I have to.”

“Why?” There’s a tear in my voice, a never-heard-before rip.

“I don’t belong with you.” She holds her head high, daring me to challenge.

I love it when she shows her backbone. I think there’s a shit-ton more attitude she’s been hiding, and I want to tease it out, see how high my girl can fly.

But if she flies with me?

Crash and burn.

I’ll only drag her down.

I have to let her go.

Because if I don’t now, I never will.

“You *don’t* belong.” Not to me, *thank fuck*. I’d destroy her, ruin her pretty patch of color in the endless dark. “Why don’t you get the fuck out, and I’ll do the same.”

When I walk upstairs, all I feel is ice.

I keep walking until my feet take me to the garage. I grab a set of keys and jump on my Ducati. I rev the gas, waiting for the engine’s rumble to give me back my spark.

Nothing.

Flying down the driveway doing a buck twenty.

Nothing.

I park outside one of Wyvern House’s clubs, cut the line, and duck into VIP. Vodka shots. Tequila shots. More tequila shots. I find the bottom of every glass.

I feel nothing. I see nothing.

When a beta wraps herself around me, her lips are wax, and her hair the color of ash.

Nothing.

Because that’s exactly what I have to offer Lilah.

Fucking nothing.

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THIRTY-THREE

LILAH

FINN'S VISIT leaves me breathless and rattled. I pace my nest, fighting the urge to bury myself under layers and layers of blankets, but now even those smell like Finn.

There's nowhere to hide.

His haunting eyes stick with me.

That aching emptiness. I wanted to pour myself into him, wrap myself around him, and never let him go.

Because he's my mate.

And he doesn't want me.

None of them want me.

I need to focus on what *I* want instead of waiting for packs and parents and—well, anyone—to feel like keeping me around.

With my nest reeking of blood orange and heartbreak, I grab a clean sweatshirt and escape the suffocating house, posting up in the gazebo where there's nothing but fresh air and starlight.

Thankfully, the Wi-Fi reaches this far.

I finish up a job, then send a huge invoice with instructions on how to route the payment to the bank account in my fake name. In the darkness, acting all cloak and dagger, I feel a little more like myself.

Or at least, the self I used to be.

I’m afraid the Wyverns have changed me too much.

I’m afraid what it’s going to be like spending the rest of my life alone.

“Lilah?” Orion’s soft question cuts through the night. “Are you out here?”

“In the gazebo,” my traitorous mouth answers.

His footfalls crunch against the grass, and the way his skin glows in the moonlight, he looks fae. “There you are.”

He was looking for me.

My inner omega squeals, because Orion wants to be with me.

He noticed I was gone.

I shake that hussy off. He only noticed because he’s just as alone as I am in that house. I’m not the one who can fix it. The pack has to get their shit together.

His pack.

Not my pack.

“What’s up?” I ask, checking my email like it’s so important I don’t give a shit that Orion’s standing there all lonely, practically begging for a hug.

“Oh. I just wondered if you wanted to watch a movie…” I sense him shuffling, scratching at his arms. “The guys are out chasing Finn. He disappeared.”

My stomach sours. Shit, I hope he’s okay.

Not that I should care, but he was feral while he was cutting me down.

“I’m going to head to bed early.” I stare at my screen, using it to shield me from Orion’s weapons-grade pout.

“If that’s what you want. In the morning…” He hesitates on the steps. “You can come up and have breakfast. We eat together before the guys go to work. You could join us…”

I don’t know if he realizes what he’s offering.

Join them?

My brain fizzles out, thinking of more than one way I could join. Like when Atlas has him moaning in the pack bed.

My heart starts to move, and I can feel the blood rising in my cheeks.

A hint of caramel hits my nose.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, trying to hold back the panic. “Good night.”

Orion frowns, his nostrils flaring.

I strain to keep rigid.

Please go. Please leave me alone.

I’m a breath away from throwing myself into his arms and begging him to let me stay. But if he catches my scent… There’ll be no more movie nights or breakfast meets. I’ll be packed in a blacked-out van headed straight to whatever pack picks me up on clearance.

“Good night,” he says, walking off into the night.

I sigh, leaning back on the bench.

That’s when a new message pings my inbox.

I frown because no one has this email address. I only use it for my black market dealings.

The sender’s handle is a long chain of letters and numbers.

Subject: Pack Your Shit

Be in the garage at midnight.

-CW

I snort.

If the C is for Craig and the W is for Wyvern, the chauffeur is getting even more delusional. He’ll never be a Wyvern.

Not that I should be smug.

I’ll never be one either.

I hurry back into the house, all-too-aware that my scent is only spiking higher.

A swim won’t fix it. Neither will starving myself.

I’m past the point of no return.

Pre-awakening, on my way to my first full heat.

I can’t stay here when a near-empty bottle of lotion is the last flimsy piece of spiderweb holding together my web of lies.

I shove the lotion into my duffle with my other shit, including the hoodies and T-shirts that belong to the guys.

They’re my trophies, and I’m keeping them.

I spend the last hour booking bus tickets and a hotel a few states away. I’m trusting Craig to give me a ride off the property, but that’s far enough. Once I’m past the gates and cameras, I’ll tuck and roll out of the car if that’s what it takes to make my own way.

The house is dead when I sneak upstairs. Orion must’ve gone to sleep and the guys aren’t back yet, with two parking slots empty in the hangar of a garage.

I stay in the shadows, crouching, waiting, and dreading what comes next, even though I should be happy.

This is what I’ve always wanted.

The chance to go out on my own. The chance to *stand* on my own and make my life whatever I want it to be.

Only now, when I picture my witchy cabin in the woods, it has a lot of alphas out back, chopping firewood in unbuttoned flannels that show off their abs. A giraffe of an omega hugs me from behind in the kitchen, nuzzling my neck while I pile up way more sandwiches than I’ll ever eat as a girl on my own.

My heart aches at the vision.

It can’t be like that.

The sound of a rickety engine shatters what’s left of my fantasy.

Craig rolls up in a rust-bucket sedan that would look more at home in a zombie apocalypse than the Wyverns’ mega-garage.

“Is that everything?” He sneers at my duffel bag.

I hoist it over my shoulder. “Just get me out of here.”

“Hold up. I have to check you for a tracking chip.”

“For a *what*?” I recoil as he reaches for me.

“A chip,” Craig insists. “The Center tags its omegas. Didn’t you know?”

I’ve never heard it mentioned, but it makes sense. Even a Darling is an investment. If I run, the OCC loses what it paid.

“Where would it be?” I smooth my hands over my arms, feeling a crawling sensation under my skin.

“I have the scanner.” He pulls out a hunk of plastic, stepping toward me. “Give me your arm.”

He’s just a beta, but the guy smells like last year’s pizza box and having him in my space sends my omega instincts flailing. My perfume rises in a panicky cloud.

Not just my perfume.

That skin-crawling sensation doubles down.

Something isn’t right.

I open my mouth to scream, to tell him to get the fuck away from me, but Craig is already looming.

“Hold still.” Craig grabs me by the throat, jamming my back against an SUV while he jams a syringe into my arm.

It’s propane in my veins.

My blood boils, vision spinning. I try to react, try to pull away, but my reaction speed is dulled. Everything’s smudged with oil, and I’m on fire.

My throat aches.

My core burns.

My scent soars.

My heat.

It’s here.

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THIRTY-FOUR

LILAH

"HOLY SHIT, YOU SMELL GOOD." Craig drops the syringe, raggedly inhaling my neck, pressing against me with his wet cardboard heat.

I want to vomit.

I want to scream, but Craig's crusty fingers clamp my mouth shut.

I can barely breathe. The air's oven hot, scorching my throat.

"C'mere." He drags me to the still-running car, opening the backseat and tossing me inside.

Fight!

I scream in my head, but all that comes out is a strangled mewl. My core clenches and unclenches, my slick flowing.

I need an alpha.

I need one of *my* alphas to make the hurt go away.

It's all I can do to breathe and not burn.

I bat at Craig's grip, hating myself when my hit lands soft as kitten paws. He snags my wrists and binds them in zip ties.

I wriggle, trying to worm away and reach the door handle on the far side of the car, but Craig grabs my calves, holding my legs in place and forcing them open as he slides onto the seat above me.

His pupils are blown. Hair frantic, his scent erratic.

"Omega," his scratchy, needy voice rakes my skin like claws. "Fuck."

He shifts his weight, belt buckle making a clink that stops my heart.

For a second, the haze clears.

No fucking way is this happening.

Fuck the heat and the hormones.

Fuck him.

I'm a fighter, and I'm not lying here letting this degenerate rape me.

The idiot shouldn't have tied my hands in front.

While he pulls at his zipper, I snag the knife tucked into my bra and drive it into his ribs.

He screams.

I kick.

Craig topples out of the car, banging his head on the way down.

My instincts scream to run, to hide, to flee.

Heat twisting in my belly, I scramble away while Craig groans on the cement.

Need to find somewhere safe.

I run through the garage door, moving awkwardly with my hands bound, fleeing into the woods while Craig rages.

I should've gone back in the house.

But no.

I don't want Craig anywhere near Orion.

I have to run.

Find a tree trunk or a cave or dive into the lake. But I can't swim zip-tied.

All the while, my heat rides me.

I feel like I'm sprinting through the desert, dry and thirsty as fuck, even though wetness flows between my legs.

I crave. I need.

Pack leader.

Atlas.

Bite.

Knot.

Pack.

I stumble, sucking in shallow breaths, sweating, and tripping on twisted roots.

Escape, fight, escape, fight.

I chant and chant, trying to stay focused, trying to ignore the cramps tightening my belly as my cunt clenches around nothing. Razor sharp with need, my scent screams where I am, my body calling out for my alphas, needing to be filled and fucked.

Craig crashes through the bushes, grunting, so easily following my scent trail.

I trip over a root and slap the ground hard. But I don't dare move. He's too close.

So close, it's like he's already standing over me when his phone rings.

Craig curses. "I'm on the way. There's been a—No. *No!* Don't come. You promised you wouldn't—! Hello? Shit. Fuck." Something crashes and shatters. Then he screams into the night. *"I'll fucking kill you!"*

My blood can't pump faster, but it switches directions, thundering into my head.

I don't know who's coming, but I know I don't want to be here when they show.

I sprint as fast as I can, which isn't very fucking fast, skirting the treeline until I'm at the far side of the mansion, just behind the back corner of the house. Through the trees, I watch three sleek black cars zoom down the driveway.

Too late to run.

They're already here.

They park in a screech of brakes, and alphas in dark suits spill out, all big, broad, and packing.

Craig stumbles to them, clutching the stab wound that stains his shirt a super-satisfying red. “You can’t be here,” he hisses. “I was bringing her—”

“We’re not here for her,” the obvious leader says. He’s the biggest alpha, huge, bulky and bald, with bloodred gang ink peeking past his cuffs and collar.

Wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley.

Or at all.

“I don’t need the money,” Craig whines. “You can have her. Just don’t touch Orion.”

I want to throw up.

He sold me.

Craig fucking *sold* me.

What did I expect? It’s not my first time being sold. It doesn’t even hurt that much anymore.

The alpha lifts his gun to Craig’s forehead.

The beta stills, his mouth dropping open in utter shock that a motherfucking drug cartel didn’t keep their word.

A bang cuts the night, hiding the sound of my intake of breath.

Craig’s body hits the ground with a soft *thup*.

“We take them both,” the alpha says tightly. His nostrils flare, and I swear he turns to stare straight at me. “Track the female by scent. I’ll handle the male.” He strides for the front door.

My heart squeezes like a lemon, dripping acid down my throat.

There should be a decision to make here, a moment of hesitation, but as soon as his feet start to move, I’m already sprinting through the trees.

Even through my heat haze, or maybe *because of* the heat haze, I know what I want to do.

I won’t let them take Orion. Hurt Orion. Shit, even *look* at Orion.

He’s mine, even if he doesn’t want me.

In a burst of speed, I cut across the garden and bust it for the basement steps before these assholes can surround the house.

I'm weak and barely functioning, barely able to blink through the mist that coats my vision and makes my body burn, but I'm going to do *something*, even if Orion wants to kill me at the first hit of my scent.

I'll save him no matter what.

Then, my conscience will be clear.

Then, I can finally disappear.

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THIRTY-FIVE

ORION

I DON'T KNOW why I wanted to sleep in the pack bed instead of my own room. I never sleep well in here, always twisting and turning. Like even when I manage to drift, my body knows I'm alone.

Always fucking alone.

Tonight the guys are out scraping Finn off whatever ledge. Tomorrow, it'll be a mission. Maybe the next day I'll find them in Lilah's bed.

I wish I was strong enough that I didn't need them, but who am I fucking kidding, bed piled high with pillows and blankets like they're the bodies that aren't here. I need my pack. I need Atlas like I need air. Now when his attention drifts, I know exactly the omega on his mind.

Because I'm just as fucking gone for her.

This morning, I walked into the kitchen smiling. Smiling because I thought I'd see *her* and we'd eat breakfast together, talking through this omega shit. Lilah's the only one who understands the madness. The only one who knows what to say and do without making me feel like I'm a straight-jacket away from a suite with padded walls.

She calms me like not even Atlas can.

She listens to me, cooks for me, makes me want to bite and claim her, which I can't even fucking do because, oh right, I'm an *omega*, not a fucking alpha.

I've always torn myself up over my omega awakening. Seriously beat the shit out of myself on any and all occasion for ruining the pack and stealing them from the girl of their dreams.

Pretty sure that dream girl is Lilah, and that adds another layer of self-loathing, because I'm not just stealing *them* from some abstract idea of an omega.

I'm also keeping Lilah from her meant-to-be pack.

Maybe I'm the one who needs to leave.

Just gracefully grab my passport and bounce to another country. It's easy as hell for omegas to get visas. I'll spend the last miserable years of my life getting fucked on a beach, drinking straight rum out of coconuts, and pining for them and her like the mopey motherfucker that I am now.

Shit.

Is this really me?

I squeeze my body pillow, burying my nose in a pillowcase that carries the ghost of Hunter's smoke. The alpha scent grounds me just enough to realize that my body's too hot, my muscles tight and aching.

Pre-heat?

Shit.

That explains the heavy moping.

I have to text the guys and warn them to clear their schedules. I need all of them here if my heat's about hit.

Finally.

It's been too long since I had them all, and I'm praying with all my crazy omega energy that this heat strengthens the pack bonds that are just as frazzled and frayed as my brain.

I'm fumbling for my phone, trying to find it in the mountain of pillows, when I hear the gunshot.

I stop moving at the cellular level, even my heart icing, freezing.

It couldn't have been…

Lilah.

Fuck, I have to get to Lilah.

I find the phone with laser focus and pull up the cams. Three cars sit in our driveway, doors swung open as more than ten guys creep toward the house.

With our silent alarms going batshit, I don't bother shooting off a text. *Jett's on it.*

I grab a gun from under the hallway table and stalk down the stairs, every muscle torqued, listening for breaking glass.

The kitchen doorknob rattles. I catch a shadow passing in front of the window. Padding silently down the hall, I slip through the gym door and lock it behind me.

The steps don't make a sound under my soft footsteps. Thank fuck I spent all those years training for black ops.

On high alert, I cross into Lilah's side of the basement. Her nest door hangs open, and my heart launches into my throat.

Did they already—

The cellar doors fly open.

I take aim but drop the weapon as soon as I realize it's Lilah stumbling in from the yard. Her hair is wild, her shirt torn and bloodstained, and I fucking rage at the sight of her zip-corded wrists. "Lilah. What the—"

She doesn't stop running, crashing into my chest. I grab her shaking shoulders to brace her.

And catch a face full of Lilah's perfume.

Burnt sugar, sweet caramel, vanilla crème brûlée.

World-changing, best-dessert-of-your-life, irresistible sweetness.

My cock goes diamond hard, and I let out a strangled, ripping noise like air escaping a balloon. "*Your scent.*"

Her plush lips press my skin. She's flame hot against my bare chest, making my temperature spike to match.

A bead of sweat rolls down my back, and my ass twitches with the familiar feeling of slick dripping to coat my tight balls. She says something frantic, probably important, but the words melt.

I fucking melt.

“Heat,” I choke out.

Hers. Mine.

Look at us, all synced up.

“Shit.” She lets out a ragged breath, swaying, leaning her weight against me like she can barely stand, and it’s all I can do to keep us on our feet with the hormones raging like I’m already buried inside her lush heat.

Her perfume slips down the back of my throat like molten caramel, smoking through every last piece of resistance.

She’s mine.

Ours.

Mate.

That’s why we’ve all been tied up in twisty fucking knots for Lilah Darling.

An omega-omega pairing shouldn’t happen, but I feel it when I scent her and I feel it when she leans into me like I’m the only thing stopping her world from collapsing.

Lilah belongs to me.

Yeah, the others belong to me too, but Lilah’s mine, just mine, in a way that snatches the air from my lungs and slaps my face with the fucking obviousness of how deeply she completes me.

I want to roar, call Atlas right the fuck now, call all of them and lock us in her nest so they can bite her, mark her, and make our bond legally binding and brand it on her body so everyone who sees her knows.

As soon as the guys catch her scent, they’ll be all over her, and I can’t wait to fucking gloat.

“Those guys killed Craig.” Lilah shakes, her words finally hitting. “They’re coming for us.”

“Shit. We have to go—” I pull Lilah, tugging her toward the cellar door, but I stumble on nothing. My ankle rolls.

Lilah grabs my arm, holding *me* up as my vision flickers.

The dark room wobbles like it’s melting, everything smudged and blurry, my head a staticy fucking mess. My ass aches for my alphas’ knots, my belly already cramping, inner muscles squeezing and ready to coax a cock *so deep*.

Meanwhile, Lilah’s scent strokes my nose, sharp and needy, making me ache to splay her out and lick her until she’s grinding against my tongue, screaming.

A purr builds in my chest. It’s lower and softer than the sounds my alphas’ make, but just as soothing. When she loosens, yielding to me, it feels like I stole the moon from the sky.

I need to have her, need to—

Shit.

I need to stop.

We’re giving off enough pheromones to fry a chicken. The Redfangs will be able to scent us from fucking Jupiter.

“We have to run.” I tug her again.

This time, we both stumble, barely keeping our feet as we head up the basement steps. Footsteps rustle the grass.

I don’t look, just shoot.

A strangled, gurgling yelp says I hit flesh.

“Both targets, back side of the house!” a voice shouts.

Wobbling like I’m drunk, I take aim, but a third guy jumps me. He knocks Lilah down the steps, grabbing for my gun. I squeeze the trigger, but he wrenches my shot into the trees and snags the gun out of my sweating hands with a grip like a coked-up lumberjack.

He wrestles me to the top step, and I fight, *fuck*, do I fight with everything I have, but I may as well be roofied. Three, maybe four breaths, and the asshole has me pinned to the grass, thick thighs straddling my waist.

Thank fuck I can't see the lust on his face, but I can feel his hot cock digging into my back. His sappy pine scent rises as he breathes me in, and his deep rumbling growl hits like sandpaper. "This one's going into heat."

"Her too," says the goon dragging Lilah up the steps.

Frantic, I find Lilah's eyes.

She looks drugged out, pupils blown, face flushed. It's like looking in a mirror, both of us trapped in the same nightmare, our bodies dancing the same dance of despair.

After all these months, my heat has to show up *now?*

The guy's weight teases my hormone-wrecked body. It craves any stimulation that'll get me off. Anything that'll loosen the pinch of these basketball-sized need-to-be-fucked blue balls, and hit that perfect spot inside me, hard and deep.

Disgust keeps me from rolling onto my back and whining for it.

Where the hell are my alphas?

I know they'll be here soon, riding in to save my useless ass, but they need to be here five minutes ago.

"I have to taste her," rumbles the sick fuck pinning Lilah.

"Don't fucking touch her," I growl, the sound high and aggressive.

"Be quiet and we'll make it good for you, Omega." The guy grips my neck, mashing my face into the dirt. Shame burns through me as I taste soil between gritted teeth.

When I buck, he growls like he's enjoying it, grinding his filthy cock against my ass. "Shit yeah, I'll rut you so hard."

Disgust rises up my throat. Or maybe vomit.

Lilah screeches. "Fucking! Asshole!"

Flailing with as little success as me, she looks ready to bite his dick off when her guy yanks her to her feet.

A red snake scale tattoo rings the wrists I'm going to snap when I break free.

The men around us still, their attention snapping to the soft footsteps approaching through the grass.

A pair of loafers stop in the dirt in front of me. Just the fucker's stance drips dominance, and I catch a whiff of strong, bitter-ass coffee.

"Get the girl to her auction. Check her in on time and then you can do what you want. Hell, she'll sell for more if you stretch her out and send her onstage dripping."

A feral growl rips up my throat.

I buck, almost tossing the guy pinning me down.

The coffee-smelling fuck drills a foot between my shoulder blades, crushing the air from my lungs.

"Dominik can't wait to see you again, Omega. And you're in heat for him." He shifts his weight, pushing the guy on top of me out of the way so he can sink his foot into my ass. "Can't wait to bury my knot in this sweet hole after he rips out your mating bites and splits you in half on his cock."

"No!" Lilah screams.

Two guys drag her away.

"Tie him up, get him in the car."

Fuck no.

I'm not being dragged off for torture. Not leaving Lilah to be *auctioned*.

The second the weight lifts off my hips, I launch myself at the leader, kneeing him right in the fucking knot. He topples with a groan.

I lunge for Lilah, but arms grab me on both sides.

"Sedate him," snarls coffee loafers on hands and knees.

I kick, throw my shoulders, but I can't shake the two, then three, then four guys holding me from breaking free while Lilah's hauled away.

“Orion!”

Her call breaks me.

Because I can’t protect her.

My impossible, beautiful miracle of a mate.

I can’t even protect myself.

There’s a pinch in my arm, and something cold and chemical takes over my veins.

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THIRTY-SIX

LILAH

I KNOW I'm about to die. Not fast, either. When we pass Craig, staring up at the sky through the bloody, ragged hole where his eyes used to be, I'm jealous he got out the easy way.

These bastards will rip me apart.

Unless I rip them apart first.

Two of them toss me in the back of their car. I hit the seat with an *oof*, face smashing into the leather. The one who pinned me makes a low, throaty growl. "Fuck, I need to taste her."

He tugs at my pants.

I kick out in panic.

Sweat soaks every layer I'm wearing, and even though my stomach cramps like the period from hell, I'd rather masturbate with a rusty trowel than touch his dirty dick.

"Back off." The second guy pulls him away. "We can't take her 'til we get to the auction. Then we can go ape-shit."

"Shit, fine." He throws off the guy's arm.

They jump in the front, and the driver guns the engine because he's not wasting a breath between now and when he gets to mount me.

Shuddering, I roll onto my side.

Orion's out there alone, maybe off to a worse fate than I am.

Focus.

Save myself first, then I can worry about him.

I take a deep breath, as deep as I can while my body steams like a sauna.

I've been fighting every day of my life.

Now I'm fighting legit thugs instead of hormonal teen omegas, but even though this heat is wrecking me, making me want to curl up like a cooked shrimp, I have a powerful new weapon.

My perfume.

These balls-for-brains were so busy sniffing, they didn't bother patting me down. Or maybe they just assumed a tiny, heat-drunk omega wouldn't be carrying.

Either way. I lost Finn's knife in Craig's ribs, but I still have my trusty toothbrush shiv tucked in my panties.

The driver turns off the Wyverns' long driveway, onto the country road that heads into the city and my personal future hell.

I can't waste time hesitating.

I whimper, channeling every fucking drama class the OCC ever forced me to take.

The guy in the passenger seat shifts to look. He swallows and stares like I'm already stripped, inviting him with spread legs.

I'm not taking this act *that* far, but his dumbass, puss-merized look is perfect. I whimper again, clasping my lower belly. "Hurts."

"I'll make you feel so good, Baby." He reaches back, stroking down my hip with hot dog fingers, and I hope he reads my shudder as a needy shiver.

"Please, Alpha. It hurts so bad." I spread my thighs and hide my disgust by biting my lower lip.

The second he catches the scent of my slick, his muscles cord, a vein popping in his neck.

His growl rips through the car.

“Rut, fuck, have to have her,” voice low and guttural, he unbuckles his seatbelt.

“Shit. Seriously?” The driver swerves as his buddy starts to climb into the backseat.

“Hurts,” I whine and sneak my bound hands toward the shiv. “Please, Alpha, *please*.”

Begging would hurt my pride if I had any.

All I have left are psycho hormones and the burning desire to stab this shithead through the eye socket.

He tries to wedge his linebacker shoulders between the seats, pinning himself like a beetle on a board. I lift onto my knees, lips parted like I’m going in for a kiss, and the idiot leans into me, leading with his fat, sloppy tongue.

I slip out the shiv, lift it high, and drive it into his throat.

Hot blood sprays my face.

He roars and gurgles, thrashing so hard he hits the driver.

The car swerves.

“Bitch!” the driver shouts. “You’re fucking dead.”

He brakes while his buddy drowns in his own blood. I’m shaking, sweating, but the only thing I’m upset about is the way the guy I just stabbed grips my shiv, blocking me from grabbing it back or jamming it in harder.

The car slows.

My panic rises. If he parks, I’m screwed. I can’t overpower him, and he won’t fall for the same trick.

As the dying man struggles, his jacket rucks up, flashing his gun. I pull it, flick the safety, and don’t let myself even think what I’m about to do.

I close my eyes, press the gun to the driver’s head, and—

Bang!

The driver slams the brake when the bullet goes through his skull. Momentum throws me against the seatback, and I fall to the floorboards stunned dizzy as the car rolls into a ditch.

Suddenly everything stills.

The only sounds are the man gurgling blood and the hummingbird flicker of my heart.

Sweating, I can’t breathe.

My head aches, my body whines, and all I want to do is slither out and make this ditch my brand new home.

I test the door handle, but the child locks are on. With a groan, I realize I have to crawl over the guy who’s finally finished choking himself to death. He’s too heavy to move.

Closing my mouth, I climb over him, rolling into the passenger seat and diving out into the cool grass.

I take a big, shaking breath.

But I can’t rest. Can’t sit still.

I need to be off the roadside before the other goons catch up. Or maybe worse. Some wannabe samaritan pulls over, finds an omega in heat, and decides to take me by force.

I kick the door shut and stumble around to the driver's side. The door swings open easily, but the driver’s too heavy to move, hunched over the steering wheel.

Bile churns up my throat at the hole I made in his face.

I won’t lose any sleep over killing a gangster rapist, but it’s still fucking gross.

I can *taste* his blood, metallic with a hint of burnt toast.

I spit in the grass, then get to work.

Sweat rolls down my back, half heat and half strain. I’m not usually this weak, but even on my best day, I’m no power lifter. Thanks to the zip ties, every tug of his dead weight wrenches my wrists.

Finally, the body falls out.

I step aside, letting it roll to the bottom of the ditch with the roadside trash where it belongs. Without looking at his face, I pat him down, grabbing his gun, a couple knives, and a wallet fat with hundreds.

It takes a few tries to flick open the switchblade. Holding it tight between my knees, I saw at the zip cord until it finally pops, freeing my stinging wrists.

Catching my breath, I lean against the car. My belly cramps so hard I can barely stand.

There's no way I'm wedging the other guy out of the car, so I leave him jammed between the seats, cringing when I sit and his body bumps my shoulder.

I buckle and carefully back the car out of the ditch.

When I hit pavement, all I see is night sky.

Minus the dead body, I have everything for the perfect escape. Car, cash, and a huge fucking distraction because the Wyverns won't spare me a single thought until they have Orion safe in their arms.

All I need to do is drive past the city and find a shitty motel to hole up in while I ride out my heat. Then I'll be on to my independent life. I'll even pay back the OCC when I have the bankroll.

I try to picture my old dream—the cottage in the woods where I live alone and age in bliss, forgotten by the world, owned by no one.

Only now, all I see is Orion snarling on the grass, trying to throw the guys pinning him down.

Trying to save me.

Why does he have to be nice to me?

Why does he have to be so goddamned beautiful?

He doesn't deserve what the Redfangs will do to him. No omega deserves to be treated like a thing. Sold and abused.

I won't let it happen to me.

I won’t let it happen to him.

Decision made, I hit the gas, heading back to the house. This is the only road to the city, so if I keep driving, I’ll meet up with the Redfangs.

I speed faster than I’ve ever driven, constantly checking my rearview. Any second, the Wyverns will fly up behind me in one of their candy cars, rolling in to save Orion like his knights in camo armor.

Aaaaaaany second.

I never spot headlights.

It’s hard seeing anything driving in the dark. Heat has a permanent haze boiling over my vision, and every few minutes, another death cramp twists everything below my ribs like a soaked towel.

Only the towel’s soaked in gasoline, and I’m on fire.

My slick is so uncomfortably wet, I swear it’s dripping into the seat. And this is just the start.

The longer I go without an alpha, the worse it’ll hurt.

The OCC told us a thousand scare stories about omegas who rode out their heat alone. Like the omega who went into heat at her pack’s mountain home while her mates got cut off by a blizzard. The pain was so unbearable, she tried to sedate herself and OD’ed.

A lot of doctors won’t even offer drugs. It’s too unhealthy. We’re efficient breeding machines, us omegas. Wouldn’t want the chemicals to affect a girl’s fertility.

Who cares if she’s in so much pain she cracks a few bones from thrashing?

I clench the wheel.

No matter how bad it gets, I can handle it. I know I can. I’ll hide and bite back the pain, the same way I always have. Like when Noelle locked me in that closet. Or when Juniper stomped my ribs into powder, and I spent two weeks alone in my bedroom, no one bothering to ask why I missed class.

I’m strong.

I’ll handle whatever I have to handle.

I’m halfway to the house when I spot the headlights flying toward me.

A flutter flips in my belly.

Only one way to stop a moving car.

I tense, gripping the wheel to stop my fingers from shaking. I have to time this perfectly.

Just as the black sedan flies past, I wrench the wheel and tag their bumper.

Our cars spin.

Theirs swerves into the ditch, mine doing a 180 on the road. My fingers are still shaking when my car screeches to a stop. I don’t move, don’t get out, just waiting to see what they’ll do.

A gun rests in my lap.

I’ll use it if I have to.

Two guys spill out of the back seat. They close in on me, lifting guns to shoot.

I duck and brace my head between my knees.

Then I hit the gas.

Bullets ping the bulletproof windshield.

Thump, *thump*. The car shakes as two bodies bounce off the hood. I squeeze my eyes shut and slam the pedal to the floorboards.

Metal screams.

Glass shatters.

The force throws me forward, then back. The seatbelt wrenches my waist, and I gag, cramping in agony.

Gun.

I need the gun.

My fingers quake, scraping the floorboards, but when they bump metal, I can’t close them.

Shock?

Shit.

Everything’s woozy and blurry.

“Bad omega,” a deadly voice hisses through the shattered car window. I catch his coffee scent, bitter with rage.

He grabs me by the back of the neck, wrenching me upright. My vision spins, but it’s hard to miss the blood flowing from the cut on his bald head.

“Dominik will fucking destroy you.” His dark eyes glow with a malice so toxic my blood clots in my veins. “Then I’ll have my turn to make you bleed.”

Braced between my knees, my fingers tighten.

They squeeze around metal.

Gun.

Holy shit, I picked it up!

The man yanks me by the hair, baring my neck, forcing me to submit. He swallows, focused on my pulse, nostrils flaring, hypnotized by my scent.

My lips curl into a snarl.

Not today, motherfucker.

I pull the trigger.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

LILAH

IT TAKES a while to get my shit together. Or maybe it's not long at all. I can't tell.

When my knees stop shaking enough to hold my weight, I step over the latest man I murdered. The other car's side is totally smashed.

Bodies on the pavement. Glass and blood everywhere.

Orion. If I hurt him—

Fire in my belly, I stumble to the car.

Orion sits belted in the passenger seat. His chin rests against his chest, his breathing shallow. His long, blond-tipped eyelashes flutter at the pace of my speeding heart.

I duck inside, and it's like cliff-diving into an ocean of applesauce, his heat turning the car into an orchard.

My belly flutters and cramps. I *need* an alpha to stop the pain, but my body wants Orion just as badly as a thick knot.

I grind my teeth, biting back the hurt and mind-melting hormones.

"Orion?" I feel his forehead.

His skin is scalding, the same temperature as mine.

He doesn't make a noise. Doesn't twitch as he keeps breathing the same shallow breaths.

But subtly, so subtly maybe I’m projecting my fever dreams, I swear he nuzzles my palm.

My organs turn to liquid.

I slash his zip-tied hands free, struggling not to breathe him in because his scent sets me off so hard.

Alone, I’m a hot mess.

With him, I’m spinning into full-on meltdown.

“Nnn—” he murmurs. “Nesss.”

“Nest?” Sliding one hand to cup his cheek, I use the other to check his pulse.

It’s slow. Like coma slow.

He’s sedated, for now.

It won’t keep him down through his heat—that takes an IV and a round-the-clock anesthesiologist. I check over his golden skin. He’s a little dirty, the collar of his T-shirt stretched, and a few tender red spots that are slowly blooming into bruises, but none of his shallow scrapes need a hospital.

Letting out a breath, I carefully shut his door, then waddle around to the driver’s side, bracing myself against the hood.

When I test the gas, the car still runs.

I buckle up and do a three-point turn that’s more like fifteen points, but there’s no one to witness my heat-drunk driving.

Half praying for, half dreading when the Wyverns catching up to us, I speed back to the pack house and gun down the driveway.

Everything past the first gate is carnage.

Bodies scatter the lawn—some Redfangs in their Ken doll mafia suits and tattoos, some in black Wyvern House camo. I want to throw up.

So much death.

And for what?

This is so far beyond a jealous beta. Maybe Craig was the Trojan donkey, tricked into opening the gates, but this is *war*.

I ease down the driveway, swallowing the urge to hit the gas, but I don't want to bounce Orion, so all I can do is look ahead, trying to ignore the twisted shapes and blood.

I park at the front door, skirting Craig's body where it lies soaking up moonlight.

With the house looming over me, the sense of doom reminds me of the moment I arrived. Only now, instead of a vague idea that something's wrong, I can smell the blood on the air.

When I unbuckle Orion, he moans.

The low sound strokes my insides like rich velvet.

I consider leaving him in the driveway, maybe running to hide in the lake, but pretty sure I could sink to the bottom of a trench with concrete sneakers and Orion's siren scent would lure me straight back to the surface.

"Lilll—" he slurs.

"I'm here. You're okay." I rub his shoulder, trying to be comforting, but his skin is sexual napalm, and the innocent rubbing motion makes my belly cramp. I settle for a hand on his shoulder, holding it rigid as a lobster claw.

Comfort him, don't lick his throat.

"Lile. Luh. Lilaa—" he's not saying my name, but *calling* it like he needs me. His garbled words ache with the same plea he'd use on his alphas.

My insides shimmer like cellophane.

Don't read into it.

It's my name. Not a love spell.

"Can you stand?" I tilt his chin, looking him in the eye.

His pupils yawn like caverns, his blue eyes as glassy as frozen lakes. He blinks, fluttering angel lashes.

"Orion?"

A soft purr rumbles in his chest, and it's better than a vibrator, shooting straight to my clit. My knees wobble. I grab the roof for support.

“Lilah,” he says low and slow, like a lick of chocolate mousse.

Is he trying to *kill* me?

“I need you to walk.” He’s literally going to cause my death by combustion.

And I won’t even be mad.

I tug his arm, and thank the gods he responds, letting me pull him out of the car. He stumbles, almost falling, nearly taking us both down, but I catch him, winding both arms around his waist.

His arms slink around my shoulders, and he buries his face in my hair.

I shiver as he drags his nose and chin along my throat, his hands slipping to grip my hips.

“Orion?” My voice is a raspy thing I don’t recognize, like I have a side hustle narrating audiobooks so smutty I can’t even sell my shit on Amazon.

“Drugs.” Orion keeps nosing my hair, but this time my shiver’s one of despair.

Drugs. Right.

That’s why he’s all over me.

Because I’m here, I’m a warm body, and whatever they gave him upped his heat from a cozy bonfire to nuclear fusion. He’ll forget me the second his alphas show.

Or worse. He’ll *remember* me.

He’ll remember I’m his competition, and his omega instincts will finally kick in the way they should’ve when I walked into his home.

He’ll murder me before he lets his alphas taste my fully awakened scent.

I have to be gone before then.

“Let’s get you inside.” I haul him against me, pretending I can’t feel his warmth, pretending he’s not clinging to me because all of this means nothing.

We stumble up the stairs like drunks. Only, if I were drunk, I would feel more numb. I've never felt more alive. Nerve endings I never learned about in class are lighting up, screaming, and begging for cock.

It gets worse with every heavy step to the second floor. My senses are waking up too, and I can scent all four alphas like they're close enough to lick.

Leather and smoke. Citrus and cedar.

A whine slips from my lips.

Orion groans and his scent rises into the tangle, so sweet and sharp with need, I'm choking on cinnamon cider.

At the top of the steps, I pull him toward what has to be Atlas's room. Even if I couldn't taste the pack leader's panty-dropping musk, I heard them in there. It's the door that couldn't hide moans so lust-soaked, a pornstar would have to fan herself.

"Nest," Orion mumbles with a subtle head jerk to the second set of stairs.

The third floor may as well be a mountain, but he's right. For his heat, he needs his nest.

Only, that's the beating heart of his territory, a place I should never even see, let alone step inside while I'm dripping with my own pheromones.

"I don't—"

"Nest," he says again, in a muzzy, puppy-dog voice that I can't refuse.

Gasping, we drag each other up the last flight and step through the door to a full-floor suite straight out of an omega's hormone-drenched dreams.

The main room has an ultralow ceiling, luxe royal blue wall hangings, and a cushion-turned-floor that feels like walking on a cloud.

But, like, a *firm* cloud—one comfortable enough to support you while you lay back and get fucked brainless by your rutting mates.

The nest is piled with plush blankets and cushions, the fabric fresh and clean. Clearly no one's been up here in ages, but it's the only spot in the

house the pack has kept spotless, always ready to meet Orion's need.

It's so cozy—*so perfect*—I want to camp here. I want to leap into the pile of blue satin cushions and curl up, feeling perfectly safe in the dim, windowless space until the alphas arrive and order me onto my knees.

My inner omega is drunk-off-her-ass-delusional tonight.

With a moan of relief, Orion stumbles into the pile of pillows I was eyeing.

He sinks in the same way I'm dying to, instinctively making himself comfortable even though he's flying high.

I need to leave.

Like right now.

But my soft, stupid heart has me kneeling beside Orion because I know this is goodbye.

I push that blond curl away from his forehead the way I've wanted to since the moment I saw him. Clammy with sweat, my touch doesn't offer any relief from his heat.

My fingers skate down to his neck, and I let myself linger, sipping on sweet apple juice while I check his pulse.

It's stronger now, a steady beat that may as well be a ticking timer, because the second it's back to normal, he'll go for my throat.

I pull away.

Not expecting him to move, I'm not ready when he latches onto my wrist, gripping hard enough to ache in the best way.

"Need," he mutters, blinking with a glazed expression that makes me suck a hot breath through my teeth.

"I…" My heart pumps, the heat making me hallucinate, because he couldn't possibly be saying what I think.

"Need." He swallows, drawing my eye to the long line of his throat with its silvery, shimmering mate bonds. "Atlas."

I flinch.

Orion isn’t even seeing me.

He’s so heat drunk, he probably thinks he’s gripping one of his mates.

“Atlas is on the way. They’re all coming for you.” I pull his fingers off one by one, even when he clings like he’s suctioned on with tentacles.

“Need,” he echoes roughly, and my heart tears because I can never be the one for him.

“They’ll be here soon.”

I crawl away, heart beating louder and louder and louder, a rhythmic thumping sound—

Wait. No.

That’s not my heart. It’s a fucking helicopter.

The sound of the blades thumps through the nest.

My time is up.

I can’t let the alphas see me here.

I can’t let them scent me.

Panicking, my whirling gaze lands on the bottles lined prettily on the counter of the attached bathroom. I dash inside, grabbing the bottle of de-scenting cologne that looks exactly like the one Hunter bought Orion the night of the goddamned ball that feels like it happened a thousand years ago.

I spritz myself like a dying bonsai, covering every treacherous inch of my heat-soaked body. The chemicals won’t work for long the way I’m cranking out caramel like a candy shop. I clutch the bottle tight, spraying every footstep I took on my way into the nest.

I stop just short of Orion, not daring to spray him while he watches me with that needing, drugging gaze. If they scent me on him…

But there’s no way.

As soon as the alphas scent Orion’s need so desperate it clogs your throat, they’ll forget I exist.

Spritzing to cover my trail, I stumble out of the nest.

“Li—” Orion calls, but I close my ears the way I’m trying to close my heart.

I can’t hear the chopper blades anymore.

I dash down the stairs, one set, two sets, three sets, careening into the basement, spritzing to hide every step.

“Orion!” Atlas bellows, his rough, aching despair jabbing my eardrums like blades.

I stumble into the backup nest and shut the door behind me. Thundering footsteps echo, and for a heart-squeezing second, I think the alphas are on their way to me.

But the shouts fade upward as they dash desperately toward their real omega.

I huddle into myself, hugging my ribs tight.

If one of them comes, I’ll break. I’ll jump into their arms, all my plans of escape shot to hell.

If I even smell one of them, I’ll melt.

But no one comes for me.

Not to check if I’m hurt.

Not to check if I’m alive.

As the seconds tick and the heat drills deeper into my body, pain bites past my muscles until it’s gnawing on my bones like a snarling rat that I can’t stomp.

Need destroys my last logic.

Willpower? What willpower?

I need my alphas *and* my omega. They’re just upstairs.

I can’t hide forever. I can’t run away never knowing if maybe, just *maaaaaaybe* they could’ve accepted me, held me, even…

I can’t let myself think farther than that.

I need to see them.

I need to stop hiding for once in my life.

Clawing to my feet, burning so hot my scent puffs out in a cloud of steam, I climb toward them.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

ATLAS

"FLY FASTER," I snarl through my headset at Hunter. The chopper's engine cranks like we're hauling an elephant, but it's not as loud as the growl tearing up my throat.

"It won't go any faster!" Hunter hammers the throttle.

Trees blur underneath us. The engine whines.

It's not fucking fast enough.

"Backup team's dead," Jett reports. "No more reinforcements in range."

"How the fuck did this happen!" I dig my hands into my thighs like they're claws. Like I'm going to rip every fucking Redfang in the country into pieces.

Because I am. Slowly.

But icy fear keeps my rage from bleeding.

Orion's been taken.

Lilah's been taken.

Everything I have, taken.

"The fuck," Finn mumbles into the headset we jammed on his asshole skull. Waking up from his bender, he reeks of booze and bad fucking decisions. "We skydiving?"

"You're about to get booted without a parachute," Hunter snarls, knuckles white around the controls.

“What happened?” Finn rubs his head. He’s lucky we’re belted in, because my fingers twitch, begging me to choke him out for taking us away from home.

I should’ve insisted one of us stayed.

It’s my mistake, as usual.

“Redfangs hit the estate,” Jett says, his voice clipped, even for him. “They took the omegas.”

“The fuck did you say?” Finn straightens, his darkness burning off the tequila.

“Our guys on the perimeter are dead,” I repeat the facts because they’re all I can handle. “Last report, Redfangs had Lilah in a car and were dragging Orion across the lawn.”

What happened next, we don’t know, but bile churns up my throat, imagining the worst fucking possibility.

As long as they’re alive, I’ll get them back.

Fuck.

My fingers dig into my legs.

“Redfangs need to die.” Finn pulls his Glock and sits deadly still.

Thank fuck.

This is the version of him we need tonight.

“Look.” Hunter tilts the chopper so its light beams pool over the sedan run into a ditch on the side of the road.

The humped shape of a body lies face-down in the dirt.

My chest seizes, but then I catch the size of the shoulders.

Too big to be one of our omegas.

A few more seconds of flight and we fly over a second crashed car. More bodies splayed across the ground.

“Not them,” Jett mutters, his voice crackling over the line.

What the fuck happened out there?

My heart thumps in time with the rotors as Hunter takes us over the lawn, heading toward the house. We pass more shapes humped on the grass. Our guys, their guys.

Fucking bloodbath.

How could two omegas survive?

“They’re in the house,” Jett yells, clutching his phone.

“Who?”

“Orion and—her. They’re in the house.”

“Anyone else?” I brace myself for another bloodbath as Hunter takes us down on the grass.

“No one. I think… I think everyone else is dead.”

“Our omegas are fucking ninja assassins,” Hunter crows.

Finn grunts, maybe as disappointed as I am that we won’t taste blood. But as long as they’re safe.

As soon as we touch ground, I rip off my harness and book for the door.

One step onto the porch, a scent hits me like a fist in the balls.

Vanilla.

Sweet.

And… *Caramel?*

Caramel apples?

Orion’s heat.

Fuck.

“Orion!” His name tears from my lungs while I tear up the steps, chasing the sweet scent that has my balls tightening and my heart chugging in my throat.

The pack moves at my back. One unit. Laser-focused on finding our omega.

I’ve never smelled his scent so sharp. It’s a fistful of knives, a promise that he’s already in pain, needing us. There’s a strange sweetness I don’t

remember tasting before, but it's been so goddamned long since his last heat.

I hit the top step and rush into the nest.

Orion lies curled on the padded floor, hugging a cushion. The room's drenched in apple so thick I can't hold back a grunt as I drop to my knees beside him.

The others thump down around us. I run my hands over his flushed skin, checking for injuries.

"Orion." I cradle his head, and the glazed look in his eye is the last thing stopping me from tearing off his pants.

"Atlas," he sighs, sinking into my touch. His eyes move slowly, landing on each member of the pack.

"Did they hurt you?" I rub the smudge of dirt on his cheek, vibrating with rage and lust and the burning need to do anything to right this wrong.

"Drugged." He closes his eyes, leaning into me. "My heat. We need…"

"What do you need?" The word fires up my instincts. I'll get him anything he wants, do anything he needs, anything to mellow out his scent and see his smile.

"Lilah…" he breathes. His voice sounds clearer, more determined by the second, but he's hot to the touch and his pants are tented.

He needs to be knotted.

My cock's already swelling, eager to ease his pain.

"Is she okay?" Hunter asks, rubbing Orion's arm.

"Safe. Saved me. She—" A cramp wracks him before he can say anything else. With a whimper that has me growling, he squeezes the pillow so hard his wrist joints crack.

Fuck.

My cock strains against my zipper, and a low rumble rocks my chest. I have minutes, maybe seconds, before my rut rises. I find Jett, the only one who isn't already stroking Orion. "Perimeter?"

“Clean up crew just arrived and teams surrounding the house. We’re safe.” Satisfied, he tosses his phone to a corner, crawling close enough to touch Orion’s ankle.

With the four of us all over him, Orion spasms against the pillow. “I need… I need…”

“I know what you need,” I rumble, kissing his forehead. “We’ll take care of you.”

“Lilah…” he spasms again, and my rumble’s more of a roar.

“Later. Let’s get you through this heat.” All I know is the girl is safe, probably huddling in her basement. Orion’s sweet, mind-numbing scent overrides everything else. It’s sweeter than I remember, with notes of caramel that have me iron fucking hard.

“Clothes,” I bark at my pack mates.

I tug the pillow away from Orion and we strip him down. I growl at the red marks on his hips. If the ones who did this weren’t already dead, fuck.

When Finn tugs off Orion’s pants, his cock pops free, and suddenly I couldn’t give a shit about the men I didn’t get to kill.

His swollen tip leaks pearlescent pre-cum, and the scent of his slick hits my bloodstream like Red Bull and cocaine.

I strip off my pants before my cock can punch through the fabric.

Have to have him.

Mate.

I pull Orion against my chest, nesting my thick cock in the split of his ass.

He moans and wiggles.

Wrapping his ribs, tilting his neck back, I suck at the silver scar of my mate mark.

My cock jumps.

“Heat,” Orion murmurs, lust drunk and losing himself. “We need to… I need—”

“I got this.” Finn crawls between Orion’s legs, splaying our omega’s thighs and taking his cock between his lips.

“Fuck. *Yes*.” Orion arches into me me, his hot skin searing me to the bone.

I tease his neck with my teeth while I pinch his pebbled nipples.

Soon, I’ll be inside him.

Soon, this heat will bring our pack back together.

I promise, when the haze clears, we’ll be stronger. More unified.

Then, revenge.

Later.

Now all I can think about is apple cider.

Orion’s sweet ass.

My knot inside.

The ache. The need for him.

The rut takes over.

Mate. Bite. Fuck.

Orion.

Mate.

Bite.

Fuck.

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THIRTY-NINE

LILAH

I CRAWL UP THE STAIRS.

Shit, it hurts.

Like my belly's spaghetti, and the fork keeps twisting.

I need my mates.

Even if they're not mine, even if I can't keep them, they're the only ones who can help through this pain. I don't care what it means for my life if they accept me.

I'll do anything to stop the pain.

A wracking cramp sends me to my knees at the top of the steps. I cry out, curling into a ball.

When the uterus-sawing sensation bites down, and I start to think I should turn back and hide, I taste their scents. The chance at relief keeps me moving.

I have to keep pushing.

Have to get to them.

Their sounds echo from the nest. Grunts and soft curses that sound like music, all in *their* voices.

It takes me a while to claw all the way up to the third floor when I can't walk and every hand, knee up is thumbtacks kneading my guts.

The door's ajar.

I crawl onto the landing and peek through the crack.

Orion's stripped, gold and pink skin exposed.

Naked, showing off the thick thighs I've seen in my wettest, wildest dreams, Atlas holds Orion back to chest, working over the silver mark of his mating bite from behind while Finn crouches between Orion's knees, his head bobbing up and down.

Finn's broad, bare back blocks my view, but between Orion's half-lidded, blissed-out expression, his brain-melting moans, and the long, slurping sucks that drill straight into my pussy, I want to throw myself into the nest crotch-first like a slutty ring toss and pray I land on a cock.

Hunter and Jett crouch at Orion's side, touching him, whispering sweet things, all of them holding him in a perfect circle of warmth and trust and pleasure.

A *shirtless* circle.

That's where I want to be.

I was dripping before I made it here, but I watch long enough to spring a waterfall between my legs. Fuck, do I need them and my body's bragging we can totally take all five at once.

Hashtag goals.

Orion's spine arches as Finn growls encouragement. When Orion comes, abs and thighs shaking, he looks like an angel. He moans velvet and sin, and Atlas devours the sound with a growling kiss.

A strangled whimper slips from my lips because *I can't.*

Three alpha faces whip toward me.

Finn's too busy to stop.

"I…" I push the door a little wider.

I need to make some eloquent speech. Give a clear reason why they should help me. But my mind is mush, my vision haze, and my throat taken over by drunken, mind-numbing cider. Even if I'd planned a monologue—

which, why would I, when offering my heat is the opposite of everything I ever said wanted—words don't come out.

I'm hypnotized by Finn and Orion. They're loving their blowjob so hard I wish I hadn't made that noise, because I need to watch until the glorious finish.

I try to take a deep breath, center my chakras and stow my mental baggage in the overhead compartments, but sucking in the scent of Orion's sweet heat, all I can do is whimper.

Get your shit together!

This is a big ask.

The biggest of my life.

When the words stick in my throat, the moment dragging too long, Jett's upper lip curls and Atlas pulls Orion tighter.

Defensively tighter.

Even Hunter shifts, squaring up to me and folding his arms across a jacked, tattooed chest where he may as well ink an extra warning—*do not enter!*

A sick premonition rots my belly.

I have to say something.

Words!

"My—"

"Not the time," Atlas growls, a bass rumble in his chest. It's the deep, warning sound that would have my inner omega running to hide under all the blankets if we weren't so busy being gutted. "Get the fuck out."

"You heard him." Jett's cold, dark gaze hits like the abyss. "You don't belong here."

"But, I—"

"Shut the door, Lilah. We'll deal with it later," Hunter says, already turning away from me.

Finn never even looks. Like he doesn't hear me. Like I don't exist.

While my heat burns me to ash, one sub-zero thread of ice cuts into my chest, all ragged, bloody shards that slice a little deeper with every pump of my shattering heart.

I could step inside. Force my perfume on them.

My pheromones would change this game in a caramel-soaked second.

But I already have their answer.

“Get. Out,” Atlas growls possessively, flashing teeth as he hugs Orion like I’m here to rip away his mate.

It’ll never be me in their arms.

Never. Be. Me.

Orion reaches, but I know he doesn’t know what he’s doing. His hand lands in Finn’s messed-up hair. Orion tips his head back with a soft, throaty moan that draws their attention back where it belongs.

Like I never existed.

My knees give out, my stomach cramping as I pull the door shut.

I let out a strangled sob.

I should’ve known better.

I did know better, and still I hoped, still I wanted—

Stupid.

Stupid.

Stupid.

I drag myself down the stairs. Just the thought of standing up straight sends knives stabbing through my belly. I want to run, run far way, and never see this house, or these alphas again, but I can’t even crawl without losing my grip every few steps.

I finally stumble into the basement, wrists and knees aching, ignoring the tears that drip onto the cement and the growing, gnawing pain in my chest and core.

I’m tired.

I’m so fucking tired of never being enough. Never being chosen. Always being the one who’s thrown away.

Even by my mates. My *fated* mates.

Fate is fucking bullshit.

I won’t chase anymore.

Not Wyvern Pack or anyone else.

I’m done begging and crying and moping. Even if I’m *not* done with this pain… I’ll get through it on my own.

Not because I’m a sad pathetic loner, but because I’m strong and powerful, and I can do anything I want.

That’s what I’m going to do from now on.

I’m going to do whatever the fuck I want, because if hiding hurts this much in the end, why be afraid of taking risks?

I crawl into the shower, turn the water to burn-your-face-off, but it’s not enough. I need to be submerged. I need the world to stop, the sensations to stop, the hurt to stop.

I inch out of the steam, and my arms and legs wobble.

I can’t make it to the lake like this.

Fucking hell.

I’ll drown if I try to find relief there, and I don’t want to die, it just feels like maybe I should.

My arms give out in front of the supply closet.

The door hangs open, and I press my cheek on the cool floor, curled up until I spot the big metal barrels of de-scenter.

It’s the worst idea I’ve ever had, but being underwater—even under chemicals—sounds like bliss.

I climb to my feet like I’m summiting Everest, and claw off the barrel’s lid with shaking fingers.

The chemical sent blows me back, making my eyes water. It’s not as sharp as bleach, but you’d have to be a special kind of damaged to think *I*

should take a bath in here.

I never claimed to be smart.

Holding onto the metal shelving, knocking down stacks of toilet paper and tissues, I swing a foot over the lip. The chemical soaks up to my ankle. I flinch, expecting a burn, because this shit is *caustic*, but it's nice and cool when it touches my heat-torched skin.

I dip my leg.

I swear, the last time I spritzed myself with this stuff it stung, but now it's…*nice*. The chemical scent sears Orion out of my system, and the thick, room-temperature liquid is honestly soothing.

Or maybe it's just that everything else hurts.

A wicked cramp folds me in half.

My core clenches, confused.

Like, it's not complicated, Lilah. Just sit on a cock and this can all go away.

No thanks.

I step into the barrel and crouch until everything below my chin is submerged. My throat and eyes burn.

Clutching my knees to my chest, balancing against the sides of the barrel, I feel like I can ride this thing out. Never mind that the cramps keep getting worse. From thumbtacks to nails to cherry red, molten lava monster swords.

Never mind that pain steals my focus, forcing it to the throbbing spot deep inside me that's never going to be satisfied.

I can ride this out.

My breathing sounds harsh in my ears, everything else silent.

Maybe I'm hallucinating, or maybe the HVAC system wants me dead, because the longer it's quiet, the more positive I am that I can hear the fivesome happening three floors up.

Orion’s knot-gasm moans. Alphas grunting and roaring. And a rhythmic, insane-paced pounding that makes me clench in jealousy and despair.

A flinch sends me slipping under.

I scrunch my face, ready for more pain, but there’s nothing.

Just the chemicals worming into my nose, and I’d much rather that than the burnt sugar scent of my traitor body.

I pop up one more time, splashing to block out the porn soundtrack echoing through the pipes. Taking a huge breath, I dip back under, hold myself down with claw hands on metal, and start counting heartbeats.

Wave after wave of cramps bite down and shake without letting go.

I keep counting, counting, popping up to breathe, then down, losing myself in the pain and the numbers, chanting.

I can survive anything.

The second the heat fades, I’ll escape while the Wyvern pack is busy with their *real* omega.

To my cabin in the woods, a new city, a new life. It doesn’t matter as long as I’m free.

Another cramp wracks me so hard I bite my tongue.

I taste blood.

All I have to do is survive.

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FORTY

ORION

THE HEAT HAZE rolls off slowly. It feels like waking from a dream, only the dream keeps playing when my eyes crack open, groggy as fuck, with a headache down to my balls.

Heat hangover.

All four guys pile around me. The pack bed reeks of good sex and alpha.

This is the fantasy.

What I've craved for so long, my body sore in the best kind of way. Like they fucked me good for *days*.

I should be in heaven.

So why the fuck is my heart pounding so fast?

Why's this sick sensation roiling in my gut?

Something's wrong.

I kick out from the tangle of elbows and bare asses.

"Sleep," Atlas grumble-growls in that deep, ear-hugging voice that makes me want to flip over and present my aching ass to him one last time for shits and gigs.

But I'm tapped.

All sexed out.

Atlas kicks up a soft purr, pulling me against his chest. I want to sink into that sound forever, but the second I start to drift, I realize what's missing.

"Where's Lilah?" I shove Atlas's chest.

"Hmm?" he asks sleepily.

"Where's Lilah," I repeat, more and more alarmed.

The guys stir.

"*Mmmf,*" Finn mutters, face-down in a pillow.

"Where is she? She was hurt when Craig—"

"Whoa." Hunter clasps my shoulder, rubbing his forehead. "I think we saw her. Did we see her?"

The memory flashes like the comet that killed the dinosaurs.

Just a millisecond, where Lilah peeks into the nest and I reach for her, inviting her to join because she's my mate and she should be here for my heat.

Shit, for *her* heat.

She's *our* mate.

Do they not know?

"She came to the door," Jett says flatly.

"Then why isn't she here?" My voice rises. "Didn't you smell her?"

"Smelled you. So fuckable," Finn mutters into his pillow.

My heartbeat roars in my throat.

Atlas rubs his forehead. "Shit. I have to apologize. The rut… I bit her head off."

"We all owe her a huge-ass apology. Did anyone even check on her?" Hunter frowns.

She's been alone? This whole time?

"Tell me. The *exact* words you told her." I yank Hunter's arm. He can clearly read my panic, the tremble in my fingers.

"Jett said…"

“I told her the truth,” Jett mumbles, not making eye contact. “You don’t belong here.”

“Fuck.” I jump out of the cuddle pile, grabbing the closest pair of pants and stumbling into them as I hurry my ass to the basement, trying not to throw up.

Maybe she ran. Maybe she’s already gone.

“What’s the rush?” Atlas grabs me, holding me back.

“She’s our mate!” I throw off his hands, voice rising in panic. “She’s our mate, and she was in heat when she saved my life. Again!”

Jett snorts. “Whatever she said—”

“She didn’t say shit! She’s a scent match, you *absolute fucking idiots*. Why do you think you’ve been hanging off her?”

“Not possible,” Atlas rumbles. “You’re our—”

“Then you have two!” I rip away from the knot-brained assholes bent on ruining my life. “Fuck off if you don’t want her, because I do. Lilah is mine!”

I tear down the stairs to the basement.

I scent crème brûlée.

Faded, but pointed.

Sharp.

So sharp I clap a hand to my belly that aches in answer. She was needing. Alone and needing without a single one of us selfish fuckers to help her through pain I can’t even imagine. Pain I’ve never once had to deal with alone.

“Where is she?” My vision swims, heart moving too fast.

“No one’s been in or out of the house,” Jett says unhelpfully. I’m going to kill him, but not until after I’ve found Lilah and shown them all what the fuck they’ve done.

My alphas’ heads swivel, catching the scent that speaks to something deep inside their souls.

“Caramel.” Finn licks his lips.

“Is that—” Hunter chokes off.

“It can’t be,” Atlas says, stubborn as fuck. “It can’t.”

My fingernails bite my palms. “Where is she?”

That’s when I hear the splash. A huge, wracking gasp.

Then another splash and silence.

Hunter ducks into the bathroom and turns off the running shower. “There’s no tub…”

Another slosh sounds from the supply closet.

A soft, splashing sound that almost breaks me.

I stumble into the closet.

A barrel lid sits on the concrete.

It’s the de-scenter we use to wash fucking floors. The harsh scent has my nose and eyes stinging.

What’s worse?

The subtle sugar fragrance mixed up with the acrid, bleachy tang. The sight of Lilah’s dark hair visible just below the surface.

“Starlight,” Finn’s voice is a scratchy wreck.

Somehow, he’s the first one to move, the first one to process what’s happening.

He reaches into the barrel and hauls out a small, soaking wet body.

Lilah struggles like she’s being electrocuted.

Her skin is bee-sting red.

The chemical sheds off her, revealing her scent.

Burnt sugar and luscious vanilla, but twisted. So painfully twisted.

The sharp, pained scent drops me to my knees.

She’s still in heat.

The fuckers are shell-shocked, staring at Lilah like she’s a wardrobe to Narnia instead of the girl we devastated.

“She’s… She’s…” Atlas stares at her in horror.

“Our mate,” Hunter grits out.

“No.” Jett fights it, but I can see him tremble. He knows.

Now they all know just in time to see how hard we’ve fucked up our best chance at happiness.

“Star.” Finn crawls to her on his knees. He better get used to the position because we all need to fucking beg.

Lilah reacts to his voice like it’s poison, crab-scuttling until she’s backed into the corner.

“Why are you here.” Squeezing her eyes shut, shaking, she buries her face in her arms. “Go away. Leave me alone. Just please leave. Please.”

My voice cracks. “Lilah—”

“No. You told me,” she mumbles, delirious. “I don’t belong. I know. I don’t belong and I’m done with you. I’ll be gone as soon as the heat… As soon as the heat—”

She grunts, her scent spiking crazily.

Done with us?

No.

It’s not happening. Not when she saved my life and all I had was a second to picture how perfect we’ll be together. *All of us.*

“You’re not leaving.”

Her eyes squeeze tighter, and she covers them with the heels of her hands, curling her toes, curling her knees like she’s pulling deep into her shell, and I’ll never get to see her again.

The sound that escapes her is a needle to my brainstem.

A raw, pained whine at the back of her throat.

A raspy, broken scream.

Between her scent and that heart-shattering sound, her pain and agony wash over me like they’re mine.

Fuck, I wish they were mine.

I wish I could take this from her, rewind time, cradle her in my arms, and hold her close until the alphas rocked up and found us both in that nest, both in heat.

I'll die with this regret.

ATLAS

The scent of fresh-torched crème brûlée rewrites my fucking DNA.

It's not just the scent.

It's the sight of her.

Lilah.

My mate.

She pulls in herself, shaking and pained, and her soundless scream is the worst sound I've ever heard. Second worst is Orion's panicked breathing as he crumbles.

The pack's a fucking wreck, and I have to shut down the bond to cut off all four flavors of despair.

Hunter freezes like his hard drive's being rebooted, Jett's grip on the doorframe is the only thing keeping him upright, and Finn is on his knees staring Lilah down with yandere-level obsession like if he submits hard enough, it'll fix this clusterfuck.

I don't blame him.

If she responds, I'll crawl like a worm.

She's our mate.

It seems so simple now that I see what she means to Orion. There's no fight. No fissure.

She's our missing piece.

Only, instead of welcoming her like a treasure, we bent her all the fuck out of shape.

“How long was my heat?” Orion asks, dazed.

“Three days,” Hunter mutters.

“Three—” I choke. She can’t have been in this goddamned barrel that whole time.

Please say she hasn’t.

My instincts ride me, screaming to scoop her into my arms and offer the shelter she so obviously, so *desperately* needs, but the reality is my touch will only make this worse.

Before any of us can restart our pulverized brains, the whine cuts and Lilah collapses.

Finn darts in, catching her before her head hits concrete.

“Call an ambulance,” Orion whispers, sounding broken, and I don’t even dare touch him. He’ll hate me more now, knowing I’m the one who drove Lilah away.

I couldn’t protect her.

Jett’s already dialing, but that’s not good enough.

“Chopper,” I bark. “We’re taking her to Wyvern Clinic. Now.”

Finn lifts Lilah to his chest, watching her like she’s the only creature in the world. He noses her scalp, and when he squeezes her tight, I know he’s ready to die for her.

I step up.

I’m pack leader, and my instincts scream that I should be the one to carry her to safety.

Finn snarls when I come too close, fucking feral at the thought of not touching her for a second.

If we lose Lilah, we lose our entire goddamned pack.

———

FINN

Everyone moves, but they're all shapes in smoke except for a single light.

Lilah's haloed in silver. But, like, *shimmering* silver. Moonlight and fairy dust and sparkling shit that lights a fire inside me.

She smells like candy.

But she's hurt, and I'm killing every single motherfucker who looks at her wrong, maybe even my brothers.

I warn off Atlas and carry her to the chopper, holding her in my lap.

"Lilah." Orion crouches next to us, but there's a little gold in him, a spot of sunshine that says he's not a threat. For a second, I can feel his pain, screaming through our pack bond.

I grunt.

He's worthy of her.

Me…not, but she's mine anyway.

And the others?

Fuck them. They did this.

"Later," I say, stroking my mate's soft, silky hair, cradling her in my arms. "Remind me what the fuck you all said to my star."

Hunter growls as the chopper lifts. "You want to start with that shit when you're the one who dragged us out last night?"

Fair point.

But I never said I wasn't an asshole.

I don't give a shit about might-have-beens, and there's not enough fucking paper to write down all the shit I've done wrong.

Doesn't matter.

Nothing else matters but Lilah in my arms and Orion at my feet.

She's mine.

Maybe someday, she'll be ours, but these fuckers can work out their own baggage.

My destiny is a five-foot omega with sharp knives, sweet smiles, and a scent that gives me life.

I'm never letting her go.

HUNTER

I fly the chopper so hard the engine screams. Pretty sure we could crash in a fireball and Finn would keep Lilah safe, even if he's charred to Hades.

I lock my eyes forward while every cell yearns toward Lilah and her hurt, intoxicating scent.

Some part of me knew.

I saw how everyone looked at her, how the pack was already starting to revolve around Lilah like she gave us back our gravity.

If I'd spoken up, I could've saved her from this pain, and now I'm not sure how or if we can ever fix what we've done to her.

An inferno builds inside me.

I need to fight. Pound flesh. Bleed.

But no amount of fighting is gonna fix this shit.

From now on, I swear.

I'll fight for her. I'll do anything to win Lilah back.

JETT

You don't belong here.

You don't belong here!

Fuck me, I know she belongs, I've always known, but I—

Lilah whines as the chopper touches down on the clinic's helipad, and the sound guts me.

Once upon a time, I wanted to stop the world from hurting her.

Now I'm the one making her cry.

I don't know if she can ever look at me, and I don't know if I can ever apologize, or if I'm too much of a fucking coward to get out the words.

I'm a fucking monster.

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FORTY-ONE

LILAH

EVERYTHING HURTS.

I've never been hungover before, but it must be like this. My tongue aches, cramps crackle through every muscle, and even my freaking eye sockets ache.

I whimper.

"Shh," a soft voice whispers. The sheets rustle, and I'm pulled gently against a warm chest, our legs tangling, arms surrounding me. His chin rests on the crown of my head. *Comfy.*

I start to pull away, but he holds me tight. "You're alright, Lilah. It's okay now."

Orion.

His voice settles the raging seas inside me.

I relax into him, enjoying this dream. His apple scent is tart, a little agitated.

He shouldn't be upset, not even in my dreams. I ache so hard, I hate to move, but I roll and nuzzle, worming my face into the fruity-sweet hollow of his neck.

"*Lilah*," he rasps, pulling me tighter.

I fit so perfectly against him.

This is perfect.

“We’ll protect you now.” He pets my back in long, soothing touches. “We’ll take care of you.”

It sounds nice.

I know it’s not true, but it’s *so nice*.

I let myself sink into him like I’m sinking into a cloud because I know when I wake up from this, all that’ll be left is the storm. Lightning and thunder and me all alone in my cave, the way I was always going to end.

The truth sours the fantasy.

I’m done being pathetic. Done hanging around a pack that doesn’t want me. I can be strong.

I *will* be strong.

I pull away from the dream.

“Careful,” Orion says, so soft.

I try to open my eyes, to break the spell, but they won’t open. I touch my face, but my fingers scrape cloth.

“You hurt your eyes,” Orion whispers. “The doctor said you’ll be fine, you just have to rest.”

“Doctor?” I sure as fuck wouldn’t dream a doctor.

I grip my temples, panic starting to rise.

“Is she awake?” A rumbling alpha voice stirs the panicking mouse inside.

Atlas.

“Lilah?” His voice comes closer.

I push Orion, flailing as I start to panic, start to remember.

They rejected me like they were always going to.

So why are they still here?

“What… Why…” My voice is scratchy.

“It’s okay,” Orion soothes like he’s speaking to a spooked horse. “You’re okay.”

“I’m not.” But I will be when they’re gone.

“Star?” Finn’s scent hits my nose, oranges sharp in a way I’ve never smelled before. Anxious?

Not possible.

Fingers brush my shoulder.

I jolt like he tazed me. “Don’t.”

“You’re at the clinic,” Hunter says, the only voice of reason. “We found you in the barrel.”

“Why didn’t you leave me there?”

Something breaks, a crash shaking the room, and a pathetic whimper slips out when I flinch.

“Quiet!” Atlas barks.

My throat shuts down. I press into the corner, my back digging into the bed rail as I hunch away from the sounds and bodies I can’t see. That I don’t *want* to see.

The commotion stills.

I feel the wires connected to my wrists, and whatever’s monitoring my heart beeps faster and faster.

“We fucked up,” Hunter says at last.

“I’m so sorry,” Orion says.

“No. I’m sorry.” I have to make that clear. “I shouldn’t have gone into your nest during your heat. I should never—”

“You’re our *mate*,” Finn growls.

I swallow a lump of coal.

So they know.

But it’s too late.

“I’m not. You have Orion.”

There’s a commotion—four of them speaking at once, their scents tangling with their words, and I scent Jett too, even if he doesn’t say a thing. He’s already said plenty of words, and I don’t want to hear another sentence from the alpha voted most likely to break me. *Again*.

“Gentlemen,” a firm female voice cuts off the chaos. “I need to examine my patient.”

“I won’t leave her,” Orion insists, his weight shifting on the bed.

His words ache in my chest.

Lies.

“You can go home.” I roll away from Orion, not caring when the wires tug. “Add my bills to my OCC tab. I’ll head back as soon as possible.” At least now that my heat’s over, I have months before I’m put in rotation.

Plenty of time to plan my escape, even if waking up in Wyvern custody means it’ll be ten times harder to get away clean.

“Lilah—” Atlas starts.

An alpha-female growl cuts him off. “Out of my room. Now.”

Orion pats my wrist, a touch I flinch away from, and then there’s shuffling as their steps fade. The door slams shut behind them.

I let out a shaking breath.

“Lilah. I’m Doctor Morgan. How are you feeling?” The woman’s voice softens. Her alpha energy should put me on edge when I’m this vulnerable, but it covers me more like a weighted blanket. She feels like the mother I should’ve had—not the one who threw me away.

“Rough,” I admit, shimmying painfully back to the center of the bed. “What happened?”

“You sustained a widespread chemical burn in addition to the backlash from your heat.”

That explains why it feels like every muscle was meat-tenderized in a lava pit.

“We sedated you for about twenty-four hours, which was long enough to ride out the last wave. This was your first heat?”

“Yes.”

She makes a concerned *hmm* that sends my anxiety spiking. “We need to run a few more tests, but your hormones are likely to be erratic for the

next few months. Since this heat wasn’t satisfied, we can expect your next cycle to be more intense.”

If the heat’s any more intense, it’ll have to take place in hell because that was already hot as Dante’s fucking inferno.

“Do I have to have visitors?” I ask.

“Absolutely not.”

I let out a heavy breath. “Can you stop them from coming? I need...space.”

“It’s done.” She pats my hand, and my bandaged eyes throb with unshed tears. “Rest. I’ll send in a nurse to check your bandages. No one else will bother you.”

When the door opens, a wave of noise bursts in. All familiar voices.

“Is she—?”

“You can’t—!”

“We’re her—”

I sigh with gratitude to whoever soundproofed this place, because as soon as the door clicks shut, I’m left in silence.

I need so much time and space away from Wyvern Pack, but their scents linger like proof that I’ll never escape my fate.

I don’t want to make big decisions when I hurt so bad. Plus, the buzz that has flowers blooming behind my bandages says Doctor Morgan has me on the good drugs.

All I know for sure is I’m done hiding.

The world knows I’m an omega, and my scent’s going to have more than one pack begging for a taste.

I don’t know if I can escape Wyvern Pack.

I don’t know if I want to escape.

What I do know?

I never want to hurt like this again.

And if the Wyverns want to beg for my forgiveness?

I’d better see them on their knees.

CAN THE WYVERNS WIN BACK THEIR DARLING?

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THANK YOU!

Thank you to my beta readers <3
Sullyn Shaw
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Nicole
Lauren

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PACK DARLING

Part One

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+ More coming soon!

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